

Halo: Contact Neuroi

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Summary: The crew of the UNSC Salamander will face their greatest challenge yet. When the testing of an experimental FTL drive goes wrong, the crew find themselves flung into another universe; one where humanity is fighting for survival against an alien menace. Even with the help of their champions-the witches-the situation is grim. Will the crew of the Salamander help turn the tide?

1. Prologue Pt 1

****Disclaimer:** I do not own either Strike Witches or Halo. Strike Witches is owned by Shimada Fumikane and Halo is owned by Microsoft Studios.**

****Author's Notes:** First, I would like to give my thanks to Bucue for all the help. Thanks for putting up with my barrage of questions and for being my beta reader. To you readers, please check out "Witches Rangers and the 141" if you like Strike Witches and Call of Duty. And Ghost, don't forget Ghost. Because he's awesome. **

****Second,** this is my first fanfic so I implore you readers to please review after reading so I can improve it. And no flames. Reviews are helpful. Flames are not.**

****Finally,** this Haloverse will be slightly AU. You'll see in a minute.**

****Also,** I've made some slight changes to some of the details in the story. It shouldn't really affect the story all that much, but I felt they were necessary. **

****Now enough with the long-winded commentary. Let the story begin.****

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><p>Prologue Part 1- _**Ignis Aurum Probat**_

****UNSC **_**Salamander**_**, Port Hangar Bay 3****

****Reach Orbit****

****March 4, 2575****

****0530 Hours, Local Time****

In one of the _Salamander_'s many hangar bays, pilots and technical crew went about on their business like professionals. Well, some of them anyways. Mostly, it was the Huragoks that were still doing their job; floating along doing what they loved to do and what they did best. The rest of them were sticking around to watch the spectacle before them.

Three humans and one T'vaoan Kig-Yarâ€"the four of them forming Fireteam Vanguardâ€"were on all fours and in the mottled green of UNSC Marine doing push-ups under the watchful eyes of a certain grizzled old Lieutenant Colonel who had a reputation during the Human-Covenant War for being gung-ho and absolutely unkillable.

"Is that all you can do, marines?! Just 150 push-ups?! Come on, son. Let me see 200!" Avery J. Johnson roared at the Marines.

The Marines in question could only grunt in answer. Not only were they wearing uniforms, they were also wearing full battle armor complete with powered exoskeletons. The exoskeletons though, were switched off. So the Marines had to do push-ups in over 50 kilograms of armor and gear using their own muscle power. In other words, it was training from hell. Even the T'vaoan was having trouble by this point.

"When I was in the Corps," Johnson continued, "we didn't have all these fancy-schmancy powered armor and personal energy shields and assault rifles to do our work for us. We had sticks! Two of them, and a rock for the whole platoonâ€"and we had to share that rock! You all are very lucky boys, but never forget one thing! It isn't the stick or the rock or the rifle that kills the enemy. The stick doesn't get up and whack the enemy's hide and the rock certainly doesn't lift itself and bash in the other guy's head! And of course, the rifle doesn't turn itself into a little girl and shoot your enemies for you! No son, it's you. Yes, you! You are the one picking up the stick and murdering the other guy with it. You are the one bashing in the other guy's head with the rock. And you are most certainly the one pulling that trigger and sending sweet hot tungsten carbide at the enemy! Never forget that you are the ultimate weapon! And that is why you must ensure that you are in tip-top shape to fight whatever monsters we encounter. Do I make myself clear?!"

"Yes, sir!" a male Marine answered, loudly.

"Yes, sir!" the female Marine next to him yelled as well, but angrily.

The remaining female Marine and the Kig-Yar snarled instead of answering, but the meaning was obvious.

"Good! 198â€|199â€|200! At ease, Marines!"

The four Marines promptly collapsed on the floor, immediately activating their exoskeletons and relieving them of the sheer weight of their armor. They laid there for a while, panting heavily from the exertion of having to do 200 push-ups in full armor and gear. The pilots and mechanics started to pay off bets as to whether or not the jarheads could do it.

One of the pilots, a blue-eyed woman with ash-blond hair, paid off the Sangheili pilot next to her and grinned at one of the marines in particular. "Hey, Jakob! You gonna lay there 'til doomsday or what?" the pilot asked cheekily.

The Marine in question wrestled with his helmet until he got it off, revealing a plain face the color of mocha and eyes of a blue so bright it was the color of a clear sky. His curly black hair was cut into a Marine-style buzzcut so that it was barely a fuzz. "With all due respect, ma'am, 'Death is lighter than a feather, while duty is heavier than a mountain'. Or in this case: an inactive exosuit," Lance Corporal Jakob E. Branley said wearily.

The female pilot raised an eyebrow. "Where's that from?"

"Imperial Japan. Either the 19th or 20th century, I forget which. Anyway, you're not the one who had to do 200 push-ups in this getup. Hell, you even bet against me. What gives?"

As for the pilot, Lieutenant Anna Hãrkãnen-Kovalenko, she just smirked. "What can I say? My faith in you must be lackin' a bit."

The Sangheili pilot who won the bet grinned in response, though to be honest it looked more like he was baring the fangs of his four-part mandibles to human eyes. "Well, my faith was well-rewarded. You should not doubt your own species so," he said cheerfully.

"Ah, go fuck yourself. I can have as much or as little faith in humanity as I want," Anna replied just as cheerfully.

The Sangheili laughed heartily and walked off, amused at the absurdity humanity was capable of.

The Marine lying next to Jakob pulled her helmet off to reveal a pale Asian face with black hair set in a boyish buzzcut. The lines of her face were incredibly fine, nearly elfin in their features. She would've looked quite stunning, had she not been panting heavily from the exertion of all that heavy exercise.

"Fuckâ€|youâ€|Anna," was all Private First Class Taiga Daidouji could say in between pants.

Another Marine next to Taiga sat up and pulled her helmet off. In contrast to the pale Taiga, this one had light brown skin courtesy of her Indian ancestry. Her black hair wasn't cut short into a buzzcut like Taiga's, but instead was pulled into a tight bun behind her head so as not to violate the regulation hair length. And whereas Taiga looked as though she were dying in agony, this Marine looked as though she had barely broken a sweat.

The Marine gave Taiga a worried look. "Taiga is okay?" she asked in broken English.

Taiga took a deep breath to stabilize herself before raising a thumbs-up in response. "Never better, Sar-chan. Just give me a few moments, and I'll be good as new."

Private First Class Sar Fen nodded in response. "Good!"

The Kig-Yar Marine then sat up and pulled his helmet off, revealing a raptor-like face covered in dark grey scales and tipped with a curved beak. He shook his head violently, rattling the black mane feathers around the base of his head. This action also shook loose a cloud of white feather dust that had built up in them. Unfortunately, all that dust just happened to fly into the path of a still-wheezing Taiga, who coughed and sputtered as she inhaled a handful of dust rather than air.

"Oi, jackass! Throw your shit somewhere else or I'll shove it down your throat!" she yelled.

The Kig-Yar eyed her with a yellow eye bisected by a slit pupil. "You do know that I did not do it fy choice, do you not?" he said, fumbling the pronunciation of "by".

"And you do know that I don't give a damn? By the way, your English sucks," Taiga said, adding extra emphasis on the word the Kig-Yar had butchered.

The Kig-Yar hissed. "Yhy don't you try saying cannon English yords yithout lifs?"

Taiga smirked. "Too bad for you I have lips, so I can pronounce it right. So suck on that, chicken-breath."

"Yes, keef telling yourself. Your 'r's still sound like 'l's and vice-yersa, fy the yay."

"At least my voice doesn't sound like two sheets of sandpaper being rubbed together."

"At least ny voice doesn't sound like an Ivie'shan yindhorn feing vlo-yagh!" Tak cried as he bit his tongue.

Jakob looked in concern at Tak, while Taiga smirked.

"At least-"

Whatever Taiga was about to say was interrupted by a surprisingly strong set of arms hugging her.

"Hey, no fight! Tak too!" Sar said to both, glaring at them to emphasize her point.

Private First Class Tak Jol turned his head and merely continued lapping his tongue trying to reduce the pain.

Taiga grumbled something rudely, prompting Sar to stare into her eyes very intently. Taiga tried to look away only for Sar to get into her face again. This continued for a few minutes before Taiga finally gave up.

"Alright, alright! I'll stop! You're happy?" Taiga said, exasperated.

Sar nodded. Vigorously. "Yes!" she said before proceeding to nuzzle Taiga on the cheek.

"Hey, quit it!" Taiga said as she tried to push her overaffectionate friend away.

Tak snorted. "I still don't know what you see in her, little sister."

"Taiga not bad," said Sar matter-of-factly.

"Well, I don't what she sees in an egghead like you, chickenbreath," Taiga shot back.

"Tak not bad too," said Sar just as matter-of-factly.

"Neither one is bad, Sar," Jakob said, brushing at a bit of dirt on his shoulder pauldron. "They're just being stupid right now."

Before Taiga or Tak could respond to that, suddenly a bell rang over the intercom. "Attention, everyone. Breakfast is being served in the mess hall starting five minutes from now. If you do not wish to be left only with chicken casserole, please make for the mess hall posthaste. That is all," the voice of _Salamander_'s AI announced over the intercom.

Jakob grinned. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go get some grub."

The other 3 marines nodded their assent. They all started to get up when Johnson's voice rang out, "Attention!"

All four marines plus all the airmen and technicians immediately went to attention. Johnson quickly ran by them shouting, "You snooze, you lose, son! Perks of the rank!"

All everyone did was stare with gaping mouths after the running form of Johnson as he ran towards the mess hall laughing all the way like a demented ogre. Silence reigned for a moment.

"_Kuso!_ Damn that old fucker!" Taiga shouted angrily as she broke the silence. She turned towards everyone. "Well come on, guys! You want to let a 91-year old man beat you to the mess hall?!" she shouted.

"No!" Everyone shouted back, with the exception of the various ex-Covenant races in their midst who answered an approximately similar word in their native languages.

'_Well technically, he's 87. But considering how fast he ran, it's not much of a comfort,'_ thought Jakob.

And so began a general stampede after Johnson towards the mess hall, leaving behind silence, the Huragok, and a few humans who decided not to participate in Johnson's little game and instead, simply took the direct path to the mess hall.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_**, Conference Room**

0540 Hours

UNSC _Salamander_'s conference room was pretty large by most ships' standards; cavernous really. It consisted of a massive room where, at the center, sat an equally as massive C-shaped holotank wrapped around a smaller, yet still quite large, rectangular holotank. Projected above the rectangular holotank via the built-in holographic projector was a slowly revolving emblem of a dragon-like salamander wrapped around a burning flame with the silhouette of the UNSC _Salamander_ behind it and set in a blue background. The words "UNSC SALAMANDER" and "LPA-1" surrounded the emblem on the top and bottom respectively and the phrase "_IGNIS AURUM PROBAT_" laid below the emblem emblazoned on a banner in gold letters, comprising the ship's motto. The twin emblems of the UEG and the UNSC were displayed on the wall like background images: not getting in the way, yet always there when you looked. Seats were securely bolted into the floor around both holotanks (for sitting obviously), with more seats folded in a pile in a nearby locker in case more seats were needed.

At the head of the rectangular holotank, Rear Admiral James Gregory Cutter, captain of the UNSC _Salamander_, was reading a holographic copy of a 250-page report detailing the specifications of a new class of FTL drive. As he read it, he ran a hand through grey hair flecked with black as he attempted to make sense of the ridiculously long and detailed report in front of him. The light emitted by the TACPAD glinted off the double stars on each shoulder.

Beside him his executive officer Lieutenant Commander Angelina Medici, sat patiently waiting for her captain to finish reading the report she had read, sort of. Truthfully, she had read through it for the parts she could understand and had skimmed the others. Despite her background in engineering, even she had problems understanding half the report, immediately concluding that only quantum physicists could have understood the parts she had skimmed over.

After a while, Cutter closed the program and set it down with a clink- of metal on metal. "So this new Slip-space drive, is supposed to work by essentially punching a hole through time and space, am I correct Doctorâ€|Voroshilov, was it?"

The tall, pale youth sitting to his left nodded. "Specifically, my name is Mikhail Alexandrovich Ashcroft Voroshilov, Ph. D.," he said with a soft British accent.

Cutter didn't quite know what to make of him. There were two reasons why this was so:

One was his appearance. He was dressed entirely in black: from his black lab coat, to his black shirt underneath, to his black cargo pants, and finally to his black combat boots. His equally black hair was a messy mop of wavy hair that would not look out of place on a mad scientist, but his expression looked anything but, blank as it was. He looked thin, but not overly so, and his skin was incredibly pale, as if he had not seen the light of day for many a year. If it weren't for his slenderness, Cutter would have thought he was a

Spartan. His steel-grey eyes watched Cutter as he spoke as if he were analyzing him and cataloguing the data somewhere, and when he spoke it was in a soft, polite British accent that seemed to only enhance the feeling of him being a machine rather than a human.

The second was the Sentinel hovering just above and behind his shoulder, bobbing slightly up and down as it stood, er, floated guard. Its single glowing blue eye watched everything and everybody without fail, and every so often it would sweep a blue scanning beam over the room as if it were afraid it had missed something the first dozen times it had done that. The Forerunner-built drone unnerved the two officers, Cutter especially so as he had had a run-in with some hostile Sentinels before. It wasn't a pleasant experience and he had no wish to repeat it. The drone clearly had its beam weapon removed and Dr. Voroshilov had assured that it would attack only in defense of him or itself, but stillâ€¦

"Very well, Dr. Voroshilov. Then may I have the answer to my previous question?" Cutter asked.

Voroshilov nodded slightly. "Affirmative, though it would be incorrect to refer to it as a Slipspace drive considering that it only makes partial use of Slipspace."

Cutter simply stared at him. "So if it only partially uses Slipspace, how does thisâ€¦"

"Space-Time Rupture and Travel System Prototype No. 25."

'_You just had to give it a 17-syllable name, did you?_' he thought sarcastically. Out loud, he asked, "By any chance, do you have a shorter name for it?"

"Affirmative. You may refer to it as the Hermes Transdimensional Engine, or the Hermes Drive."

Cutter blinked at the unusual name, but pressed on. "The Hermes Drive, how does it work?"

Now it was Voroshilov's turn to blink. "The information was in the report. You did read it, did you not?"

Cutter gave Medici a look that said, "Can please you explain it to this gentleman?"

"Dr. Voroshilov, while your report was meticulous and detailed, it was also completely uninformative," Medici explained with a serene smile that did nothing to hide the bluntness of her words.

Voroshilov blinked twice. "Exactly how is the report uninformative? I specifically gave the full details of every prototype I had completed in there and-"

"And that is why the report is uninformative. Simply put, the main problem is information overload. Combine with the liberal use of jargon, it made most of the report incomprehensible to all but academics," Medici explained, watching Dr. Voroshilov frown slightly at her. "Now why don't you try again, but this time summarize it in layman's terms."

Voroshilov sighed. "Very well, if I must." His eyes became unfocused as he thought about how to deconstruct his report and reconstruct it into something even his father would have understood. It lasted less than a minute. "The basic theory behind my Hermes Drive involves opening a breach in the space-time continuum in Slipspace. First, the ship equipped with the Hermes Drive must enter Slipspace through the use of a Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine or a Covenant analogue. Then, and only then, would the Hermes Drive be used. There are two stages to the operation of the Hermes Drive. First, a large quantity negative mass particles-

"Pardon?" Cutter interrupted.

Voroshilov's neutral expression cracked a bit, looking annoyed at having been interrupted, but he did try to explain it. "Negative mass particles are particles that have negative mass. It is self-explanatory. For example: a kilogram of negative hydrogen would have a mass of -1 kilograms."

Cutter tried to wrap his head around that concept. "But that's impossible, is it not? How can something have negative mass? And just to be clear, it's not antimatter, is it?"

"Negative. Antimatter has an opposite charge and particle properties to normal matter and when it comes into contact with normal matter, mutual annihilation occurs, resulting in the destruction of both substances along with a significant amount of energy. Matter with negative mass exhibits no such destructive properties upon contact with normal matter. It does, however, exhibit unique properties upon space-time that makes it useful for a variety of purposes besides my Hermes Drive. In fact, the material forms the basis for the operation of the repulsor engines used by Covenant ships for sublight travel. Now may I continue with my explanation?"

Cutter, already regretting his decision to ask for clarification, just nodded. "Exactly what have been the techies doing while I've been asleep all these years? I'd better ask Medici for some of her issues of Scientific Universal later," he made a note for himself.

"As I was saying, first, a large quantity of negative mass particles is generated by the Hermes Drive, then it is collected and formed into a bubble around the ship via a special electromagnetic field. With this bubble in place, the ship immediately begins to warp space-time within Slipspace and quickly translates so high up into Slipspace that it actually breaches the boundaries of this very dimension, allowing it to traverse a once-theoretical region that I have dubbed Extra-Dimensional Space. You see, it is-

Cutter quickly held up a hand to interrupt Voroshilov before he launched into another lecture. Honestly, his brain would have melted if he had to endure another drawn-out explanation like before. "Alright, let's just skip the technical details so you can tell me why did you select my ship for this experiment of yours?"

"My reason for using your vessel is simple," as Dr. Voroshilov continued to explain, looking even more annoyed now that he had been interrupted twice. "The UNSC Salamander has a far larger power supply than what is necessary to power it. Normally that reserve of

power would be used to enhance the ship's weapons, correct?"

Cutter nodded in confirmation.

"I plan to use that extra reserve to power the Hermes Drive. The previous tests had involved small drones equipped with a scaled-down version of the Hermes Drive, yet still required an exorbitant amount of power. Based on my calculations for the full-sized Hermes Drive's power requirements, either your ship or the UNSC Reach would have sufficed for this test while still leaving enough power to operate. And since the Reach will not be launched for at least 8 months, your ship was chosen instead."

"And I suppose HIGHCOM is interested in your Hermes Drive enough for them to sign off on this?" Cutter asked wearily.

"It was on the last page of my report, Admiral Cutter. My experiment has the full support of the United Nations Space Command Navy."

"Which brings me to my point: why did HIGHCOM approve this experiment on a UNSC warship?"

"I believe it has to do with the results of my tests with my Hermes Drive on my drones earlier."

"And what, pray tell, were the results? And please spare me the details."

Voroshilov sighed and continued. "The results of all previous tests with the Hermes Drive were as follows: all drones successfully entered Slipspace, successfully activated and used the Hermes Drive, and successfully exited Slipspace at their destinations with no lag time observed by outside instruments. In other words, the drones arrives at their destinations instantaneouslyâ€"or as near to instantaneous that outside instruments could not measure the differenceâ€"regardless of distance traveled."

That got both Cutter and Medici's attention instantaneously, or as near to instantaneous as to make no difference. "Did you say the drones arrived instantly? Without regard to distance?" Cutter asked.

Voroshilov looked annoyed at having to repeat himself once more. "Affirmative. The longest jump made was from Earth to Harvest. The monitoring stations at both Earth and Harvest recorded the time lag to be zero, or as near to zero as to be undetectable to the instruments. In order to positively confirm this, I would require more sensitive instruments, but that is another issue I shall reserve for another time."

Cutter's eyes widened in shock. Harvest was on the very edge of UEG-controlled space: located at over 100 light-years from Earth in the Epsilon Indi system. To be able to travel that far a distance instantaneously would be a tremendous breakthrough. Cutter was already imagining how the Battle of Harvest (both battles) would have turned out had the UNSC possessed this kind of technology, then winced mentally as he realized it still wouldn't have made much of a difference. Cutter glanced at de Medici and noticed her eyes were practically glowing as she imagined the possibilities this Hermes

Drive offered. Cutter however, wrested his thought away to ask,

"So what were the conditions of the drones?" Cutter knew from experience that every silver cloud had a lead bottom somewhere, and he had resolved not to be taken in by every new piece of tech like the younger officers seem to be these days.

However, Voroshilov quickly proved experience to be wrong. "The drones successfully exited Slipspace unharmed, albeit significantly older than the rest of the universe."

That snapped de Medici out of her thoughts. "How significant?" she asked.

"It varied from drone to drone and was in direct proportion to distance traveled. In the case of the Earth-Harvest drone, it appeared the drone's onboard instruments recorded that 25 hours, 17 minutes, and 49 seconds had passed in transit. I shall have to find a way to rectify this problem later."

'_A little over a day then. Not bad,'_ Cutter thought.

Considering that even with the most powerful military slipspace drives the voyage from Earth to Harvest still took a little over 71 hours, "not bad" was quite possibly the understatement of the century.

Cutter sighed in defeat. Even he had to admit, this Hermes Drive was the most promising tech he'd ever heard of. "Very well, then. Honor?"

Salamander's emblem vanished. Moments later, the ship's AI materialized at the center of the table. For its avatar, _Salamander_'s AI chose to represent itself as a tall woman with dark hair tied into a tight bun. She wore the same space-black uniform as the rest of the UNSC Navy officers, but instead of a white peaked cap she wore a white beret on her head. The AI avatar stood stiffly at attention, with her right hand held at her forehead in a salute.

"**Honor Harrington, reporting as ordered, sir!**" she belted out crisply.

"At ease, Honor," Cutter said, causing Honor to relax into parade rest. "Tell the ship our guest arrived in that they may bring it in to an available hangar."

"**Aye, sir. Port Hangar Bay 2 currently has an open slot. Directing the *_**Back in Time**_* to the hangar now.**" she said before disappearing.

Her avatar was quickly replaced by a holographic projection of Port Hangar Bay 2. The great doors of the hangar bayâ€"made up of about 5 meters of Titanium-A5â€"slid open; the atmosphere within protected from ejection by a weak energy shield active at all times.

Dr. Voroshilov then put a finger to his ear. "Curiosity, you may bring the _Back in Time_ in now," he said, apparently speaking into a microphone.

Thereafter, Dr. Voroshilov's ship floated into the hangar to be grabbed by docking arms, the sight of which made one of Cutter's graying eyebrows quirk up in surprise.

'_Now which scrapyard did he get that from?_' Cutter wondered.

The ship being pulled into the hangar was an ancient Interstellar War-era _Razor_-class prowler. It's curved, sweeping wings combined with its sharp nose gave it a graceful, ray-like appearance that contrasted sharply with the usual blocky designs of UNSC ships. Its black skin seemed to almost suck in the light, giving it a menacing air about it. Combined with its graceful design, one could compare it to a manta ray. As the docking arms turned it around and deposited it onto an empty spot next to an almost equally as massive Eagle heavy dropship though, Cutter realized that something looked off about the stealthy corvette.

The ship's torpedo tubes on either side were no longer there. One had been replaced with what looked like a small hangar, and the other was now something that defied attempts to explain its appearance or purpose.

As the docking arms laid the _Back in Time_ down on the hangar floor, UNSC personnel went over to examine the ship. The docking ramp lowered and out walked, to the surprise of everyone who saw it, a butler.

A real butler.

The kind of butler who looked like he should be serving Earl Grey tea in a fancy English manor house on a silver platter. Only in this case, he was carrying a metal container in each arm.

"**Pardon me, sirs, madams, but would any of you be so kind as to direct me to Hold E-26?"** the butler asked politely. Only the slight modulation in his voice indicated that he wasn't quite as human as he looked.

One of the Navy ratings gave him the directions from her TACPAD.

"**Thank you ever so much, madam.**" The butler then gestured back to where he walked down from. "**Gentlemen, come now! You have your orders! Hop to it, then!**"

As soon as he'd said that, a collection of humanoid utility robots and Sentinels streamed down the ramp. Cutter was about to issue the order to lock the hangar down when he realized none of the robots were attacking. They filed out in a long procession, each robot carrying a container of varying sizes. Cutter even saw a trio of the fearsome Enforcer Sentinels, each carrying a heavy load of machinery using its claws with as much delicacy as it could muster with those massive things.

Finally, as if it couldn't get any more surreal, an eyeball-like Monitor floated out the ramp, apparently directing the Sentinels. Suddenly, an avatar of the Monitor appeared in the projection and turned to Dr. Voroshilov.

"**Since I have been allowed inside, does that mean negotiations are

over, sir?"** the Monitor asked inquisitively.

"The negotiations are almost complete Curiosity. I am now in the final stages of the negotiations," Dr. Voroshilov answered.

"Wait, wait, hold on! What is the meaning of this?!" Cutter shouted in confusion at the absurdity happening onboard his ship.

The Monitor's virtual avatar spun around to face the two officers.

"**Oh! Good day, sir, ma'am. My name is 112 Guileless Curiosity, but you may call me Curiosity for short. How do you do?"** it greeted in a friendly-sounding British accent.

Cutter was a bit thrown off by its politeness and pleasant tone of voice.

Not so for Medici.

"Dr. Voroshilov, would you care to explain this? Your Sentinel by itself was odd enough, but thisâ€¦" she gestured to the line of robots streaming out of the hangar and Curiosity whose avatar looked back and forth from the Lieutenant Commander and Dr. Voroshilov as its real body continued directing the Sentinels. UNSC personnel backed away from the line of Sentinels, with the exception of the Sangheili who tended to stand gazing in awe and/or made way for the Monitor and Sentinels, calling them "Oracle" and "Holy Warriors" respectively. They had no idea what to make of the humanoid robots, but they made way for them as well.

Dr. Voroshilov held up a hand. "Forgive me, but one of the conditions that I had made prior to allowing the UNSC access to my Hermes Drive for testing is that I do not have to answer either questions regarding my companions or any questions regarding my ship, so I am afraid my answer to your question, Lieutenant Commander de Medici, is no."

'_My 'companions'?'_ thought Cutter as he watched de Medici give Dr. Voroshilov her patented "Angelina de Medici Scary Smile".

"However, I can assure you that they are harmless, barring any hostile action directed against my person or themselves. Does that satisfy you, Lieutenant Commander?"

Medici maintained her scary smile for a few more moments before the threatening aura faded and she answered, "For now, it does." She then turned to Cutter. "And you, Skipper?" she asked.

'_Remind me to never raise her ire,'_ Cutter noted before answering, "I suppose so."

"**Oh, then I'll just continue on my way. I'll see you later, sir,**" Curiosity said before his avatar disappeared.

Honor's avatar then reappeared. "**Will that be all, captain?"**

"Yes, that will be all, Honor," Cutter answered.

Honor gave a salute. ****"Aye, sir," s****he said before disappearing for good this time.

'_Highly professional and polite to boot. An excellent AI. It's too bad not all of them are that well-mannered,"_ Cutter thought.

Everyone took that as the signal for the meeting's end. Cutter extended a hand. "Well, it's been a pleasure, Dr. Voroshilov, and let's hope the test turns out well."

Dr. Voroshilov stared at Cutter's hand as if he was a bit unsure of what to do with it. Then, hesitantly, he grasped the offered hand.

Cutter noted the strength of the grip. It wasn't particularly tightâ€"he'd met people who'd try to crush other people's hands when they're shaking them out of some inferiority complex; this wasn't one of themâ€"but Dr. Voroshilov's hand felt like it was made of Titanium-A for all its thinness. Apparently, Medici felt the same way, as she quirked an eyebrow up in surprise.

"Negotiations have been concluded. Good day then," he said simply before walking towards the door. His Sentinel beeped a farewell at the two officers before following its principal out the door.

After Dr. Voroshilov had left, Cutter slumped back down into his chair and smoothed back his black hair, already mostly grey due to a combination of age and stress, a shipload of stress. "Alright, who decided that my ship had to be the testbed for every piece of experimental tech in the UNSC? And why in God's name did you ever let that man onboard?" he asked wearily.

Medici looked at him with surprise. "Dr. Voroshilov?" she asked.

Cutter nodded in confirmation. "He acts suspicious. He looks suspicious. Hell, he is suspicious. Why the hell did you approve him onboard?"

Medici thought for a moment before answering. "To be honest, I'm not all that certain. I just looked into his eyes andâ€"I had a feeling he can be trusted."

Cutter levelled a blue-eyed gaze on her. "So, it's a gut feeling?"

Medici answered that gaze with a hazel-eyed gaze of her own. "Pretty much."

Their gazes contested each other for dominance for several seconds before Cutter's mouth quirked up in a lop-sided smile. "Hm, alright then. God knows I've gone off on hunches before. And honestly, even a hunch sounds better than all the experimental stuff HIGHCOM seems to insist on my ship with."

"Well it's not that bad, Skipper," Medici consoled. "At least we got plasma torpedoes now. Remember how your fellow captains were all talking about how jealous they were that your ship was getting the new launchers?"

"Heh heh, yeah. I'm guessing they forgot to read the word 'experimental' on those plasma torpedoes. I remember all too well that anything with that word in it usually had a habit of either not working when you wanted it to, or worse, exploding when you _didn't_ want it to."

Medici laughed softly. "I think you're giving the plasma torpedoes just a little too much grief. We do actually have some experience with plasma weapons, you know."

Cutter laughed as well, a bass tone to the Medici's contralto. "Yes, that's the operative word, isn't it? 'Some'. Mark my words, at least half of those torpedo launchers will explode when you try to fire them. I'll bet 50 credits on that."

Medici grinned. "It's a bet then," she said cheerfully.

The two friends sat together in a warm silence, basking in the humor of their situation.

Cutter stretched. "Well, it should be about time for breakfast now. Shall we adjourn to the wardroom for some breakfast?" He asked her as he began to walk towards the door.

But before he could, Medici grabbed his shoulder. "Not yet, Skipper. You still have a meeting with that Materials Group technician."

Cutter scratched his head. "Yes, him. What was his name again?"

"His file said his name was Dr. Hal Emmerich, but he insists on people calling him Otacon."

"Otacon?"

"A nickname, I assume."

Cutter sighed in exasperation at all eccentric scientists everywhere. "So what does Dr. 'Otacon' want?"

"It's about _that_."

Cutter rolled his eyes. "Again? If he had wanted to keep it a secret, he's shouldn't continue having closed-door meetings with the commanding officer about it. Besides, what's there to talk about? We've already approved the tests and the assigned pilot. It should be starting right after we complete the tests for the Hermes Drive."

She shrugged. "Apparently, the test pilot hasn't arrived yet. Dr. Emmerich wants a back-up pilot chosen in case the test pilot doesn't show up in time."

Cutter sat heavily back down on the chair. He sighed and said, "Maybe we can still get something quick to eat before we go to work. I do _not_ fancy working on an empty stomach."

Medici nodded and sat down on the chair next to him, "Now that is something we both agree on."

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_**, Mess Hall**

0604 hours

The group of stampeding marines and crew finally reached the mess hall after about half an hour of running around like a mob of chickens with their heads cut off. Needless to say, Lieutenant Colonel A. J. Johnson was already there, reading something on his TACPAD. It must've been amusing, considering he was in the middle of laughing when the group stormed into the mess.

He looked up and waved at the group. "What took you guys so long?" He asked with a perfectly innocent expression on his face that was only ruined by the wide grin stretching across it.

The group had their mouths gaping wide open. _'How the hell did he get here this quickly?!'_ they all thought.

Johnson kept his huge grin plastered on his face. "Now here's a question for you all. Answer it correctly and you'll get a cookie. Hell, I'll even let you sit with us."

'_Us?'_ they all thought.

It was then that they noticed the four people sitting near to Johnson. Or rather, the four giants seeing as none of them were under 2 meters tall. The group stared, or rather, gawked at the Spartans. The Spartans stared back at the group with impassive gazesâ€|well, two of them were.

One of them was grinning at them, his green eyes filled with amusement. "Man, he sure got you guys good!" said the brown-haired Spartan, who was still grinning at them, yet was somehow coming off as friendly. Despite how pale it was, his Mediterranean skin tone could still be clearly made out.

Sitting to Lucian's left was a grey-eyed woman with her black hair tied behind her head in a short ponytail. She was chewing on a mouthful of food as she stared inquisitively at the group with bright, shiny eyes, looking for all the world like a Spartan chipmunk. One eyebrow was thinner than the other due to a mishap with one of her "toys".

In front of him, sitting next to Johnson, the black-haired and black-eyed Asian man gave a nod. He looked pretty ordinary for a Spartan save for an energy sword and a black monomolecular sword clipped to his belt, which were his favorite weapons.

Finally, sitting in front of Johnson, was a woman with snow-white hair dangling to her shoulders. Her skin was even paler than the other two and her blood-red eyes gazed at the group from Hangar Bay A3.

The gaze of the four Spartans transfixed everyone enough to pretty much stop their mental processes, save for one marine who had been thinking about the question Johnson had asked them.

"Damn! It was at that first intersection, wasn't it?" Jakob wondered out loud.

All eyes turned towards Jakob, including the Spartans whose gazes now settled on him and him alone. Anyone who had that much attention on him would feel uncomfortable. Jakob felt a bead of sweat run down the side of his head.

"Interesting theory you got there. Care to back it up, rookie?" Johnson asked with a raised eyebrow.

Jakob gulps. "Well, at the first intersection, I thought I heard footsteps coming from the left passage, but then I heard your voice taunting us. It came from the right corridor. Since you logically couldn't have been in two places at the same time, I thought that the footsteps I heard were a decoy or just a random person walking through."

"Then why didn't you say anything to your comrades?" Johnson asked, curiously.

Jakob gulped. "Well, I could've been wrong. So I didn't want to throw the search off if I was."

Johnson threw back his head and laughed long and loud. "You should've trusted your instincts! Here, I'll let this guy explain." He pulled a small holographic projector out of his vest and placed it on the table. "Come on out Happy and explain it to these swabbies and jarheads!"

The projector activated with a glow and a figure materialized in the air above it. At first glance, it looked like a large Maine Coon cat just over a meter long with a grey coat striped with black. A second glance though, will reveal the presence of a third pair of limbs between the other two pairs: something no Earth cat had. In addition, the foremost pair of limbs ended not in paws, but in hands that would've looked monkey-like but for their four digits: three fingers and one thumb. The long tail extending from the 6-legged cat's rear was furry and tube-like.

The cat yawned at the sight of the men and women staring at it, and after a short while gave a cheerful **"Bleek!"** at them.

The Port Hangar Bay 3 group were stunned beyond belief. Human and alien alike gaped at the 6-limbed cat.

"Who or what the hell are you? Some kind of mutant cat?" Taiga asked in a disbelieving voice.

"Bleek!" the cat answered happily.

"â€|Yeah, I don't know about you, but no cat I've ever known bleeks instead of meows. Mutant cat or not," Jakob said after several seconds had passed.

Johnson laughed. "Glad your head is screwed on right. This is Nimitz. Specifically, Nimitz-158. He's one of the dumb AIs serving aboard the Salamander, smoothing things out and helping personnel. I justâ€|appropriated him for this exercise.

Taiga stepped in and asked the question that had been on everyone's mind, "So how did you-

"**What's the matter, son?! Can't you tell the difference between me and the Sergeant Major here?!"** Nimitz-158 shouted in perfect imitation of Johnson's voice, right down to the lingo.

Immediately, the Port Hangar Bay 3 group started complaining about how unfair that was.

"You really think the enemy's going to play fair out there?!" Johnson shouted, interrupting the complaints. "You really think they're going to play by the rules like good little boys and girls? Hell no! They're going to use every little dirty trick in the book and more that's not even in the book! Forget that for even a moment and you're gonna find yourself with a glowing pink crystal sticking out of your back!"

Many of the men, women, and aliens cringed at the image.

"Now go on and get breakfast! You got a long day ahead of you!"

The Port Hangar Bay 3 group quickly split up and headed to over to the mess counter.

"Hey, Lance Corporal Branley!"

The sound of Johnson's voice made Jakob stop. He turned around just in time to see Johnson throw something at him. He just managed to catch it.

'_A fortune cookie?_'_ Jakob thought as he examined it in his hand.

It was indeed a fortune cookie wrapped in clear plastic. Judging by the panda wearing a chef's hat printed on it, it was from Panda Kitchen. It was a bit warm from being in Sgt. Maj. Johnson's pants pocket for so long, but otherwise just a regular Panda Kitchen fortune cookie.

"I did promise you a cookie if you got it right, Rookie." Johnson quipped. "Now why don't you come over here and sit us?" He patted the seat next to him.

Jakob glanced at Johnson and the Spartans, then looked back at his friends Taiga, Sar, Tak, and Jimmy who were waiting for him.

"Maybe some other time, Lieutenant Colonel. I kind of want to sit back with these guys," Jakob said as he pointed a thumb back at his friends.

Johnson laughed. "Carry on then, rookie!"

Jakob nodded and rejoined his friends.

* * *

><p>At another table

0610 Hours

Jakob turned the fortune cookie over and over in his hand, trying to see if it's really real and not some stupid prank by the Lieutenant Colonel.

"Come on! Just open it up already, Jake-kun. What could he possibly fit in there anyways?" Taiga asked from Jakob's right.

"I don't know. That's why I'm looking," he said.

"Maybe there's a black hole hidden in there or something." Anna suggested from Jakob's other side.

Everyone looked at her strangely. "Seriously? A black hole? How the hell would the Lieutenant Colonel fit a black hole in here?" Jakob asked disbelievingly.

Anna shrugged. "I don't know. But remember, the guy survived getting shot with a beam from one of those Eyeballs in the chest. If he could do that, he can do anything."

Jakob stared at him, unable to come up with anything to say, then returned his attention to the fortune cookie. He looked it over some more, but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. "Sar, what do you think?" He asked as he tossed it to Sar.

She held it close to her face and looked it over like Jakob did. She then sniffed it. "Smells sweet," she said.

Jakob nodded. "Yeah, and what else?" He asked.

Sar shook her head. "Nothing. Tak?" She asked as she handed the fortune cookie to the T'vaoan Kig-Yar.

Tak held the fortune cookie in a three-fingered grip and began to sniff it closely.

"No. I don't snell anything other than the cookie. If there is something else there, the snell of the cookie is vl-agh!" he suddenly yelped.

Jakob looked up in alarm. "What happened?"

"I fli' eye ung a'in."

"â€|What?"

"I bit my tongue again," Sar translated.

Jakob shot a glare at Taiga for snickering, before looking at Tak in concern. "Tak, this is the fifth time you bit your tongue today. How long is this going to continue?"

Tak picked up his drink and dipped his tongue briefly in the cold water to soothe the pain before speaking.

"As soon as I get ny translator vack fron that Huragok," he said slowly. "Can you sfeak to thenn and see yhen that yill fee?"

Jakob nodded. "Alright, I'll talk to them as soon as I can. Just,

stop trying to speak English until you get your translator back, even if you have to get Sar to translate Essh'k for you. Your tongue is going to get infected if you bite it too much. Promise me, okay?"

Tak muttered something Jakob couldn't understand.

"Sar?" Jakob asked.

"Fine," she translated.

Jakob nodded in satisfaction. "Great. Now give that cookie here."

Tak tossed the fortune cookie back to Jakob. Jakob then took a deep breath and with one movement, popped open the fortune cookie's wrapper.

â€|Nothing. No explosion. No "End of the World" as the yknew it. And certainly no black hole magically put there by an unkillable Lieutenant Colonel.

Jakob pulled the fortune cookie out of its wrapper and cracked it open to reveal his fortune.

"'Have confidence and trust in yourself, and you will be successful'," he read the small strip of rice paper out loud.

Taiga raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like standard fortuneteller mumbo-jumbo to me."

Jakob shrugged and popped the fortune cookie into his mouth, rice paper fortune and all. "So what? There's no harm in following it. It sounds like good advice actually."

Taiga snorted. "You sound like some of my older relatives. They believe in all that fortune shit. What are you, Naniwan?"

"Kenyan, thank you very much," Jakob said around his fortune cookie. "And yes, I believe in it. Why shouldn't I?"

"Yell, it's not exactly scientific or logical," Tak interjected. "It sound like a suferstition fron left over fron older tines."

"Et tu, Brute?" Jakob said with a wounded look in his eyes. "Sar, don't tell me you agree with him?"

She nodded sagely in response. "Fortune is magic. Magic not real."

Jakob frowned and just began shoveling in chicken casserole from his tray. "Man, you guys have no sense of wonder."

2. Prologue Pt 2

****Disclaimer: See previous chapter.****

****Hello, and welcome back to the latest chapter of Halo: Contact Neuroi! This is the second and final part of the prologue, so get**

ready for the main story to begin next chapter.**

First off, I'd like to thank Bucue for beta-reading for me. Please check out his/her stories while you're logged in.

And again, please leave a review. And no flames.

I just realized, I made some grave errors with regards to some of the witches' ranks. I've corrected this now. Apologies for the errors.

And now, without further ado, let's begin.

* * *

><p>Prologue Part 2- Just Miscommunication

506**th**** "Noble Witches" Joint Fighter Wing A-Unit Base, Sedan, Gallia, Earth**

March 4, 1945

Flying Officer Kunika Kuroda

1006 Hours, Local Time

The chestnut-haired Fusoan girl ran down the hallway carrying a stack of reports. She wore a Fusoan shrine maiden's _haori _with a shortened purple _hakama_, signifying her noble blood. Her black arm, neck, and leg bracers glinted off the light from the fancy lighting on the walls and the floor beneath her sandaled feet was covered in rich carpeting, yet she noticed neither of these things in her hurry to deliver the reports. Beside her feet loped a fuzzy brown European rabbit that was frantically trying to keep up with his owner.

Running with the Fusoan girl was a boyish-looking, red-headed Belgican girl with bright blue eyes carrying a similar stack of reports. She wore a brown RAF flying coat with black shorts and a black and white-striped scarf tucked into her coat. To top it off, she wore a green Britannian flat cap on her head. In complete contrast to the Fusoan's frantic expression, the Belgican girl looked far more relaxed, even whistling a tune as she ran alongside her friend.

"Come on, Kunika. What's the rush? We're already late as it is. Why not take it easy for a while?" the Belgican girl asked calmly.

The Fusoan girl, First Lieutenant (ä,-å% _ChÅ«i_) Kunika Kuroda, looked at the Belgican girl in shock. "No way! If I mess up again, there's a chance they might dock my pay! And I'm not going to let that happen, not when my family needs this!"

The brown lagomorph loping alongside Kunika's feet squeaked in agreement, emphasizing it with an extra-high hop.

Pilot Officer Isabelle du Monceau de Bergendal, or Isaac to her friends, just nodded in sympathy. She's heard her friend talk about her family's situation before. Apparently, they were nobility in name

only. They weren't exactly destitute, but they weren't really what you'd call well-off either. "Aw, lighten up. You know Commander Grunne wouldn't get mad over a few late reports."

Kunika shook her head. "It's not the Commander I'm worried about. It's Major Wittgenstein. She threatened to reduce me to half-pay if I screw up again"

Isaac frowned as she thought about it. It sounded like her. Major Wittgenstein was not the sort to tolerate tardiness.

"She really needs to stop being so uptight. Maybe she needs to go on a nice, long hunting trip in the mountains? I hear the duck hunting is nice this time of year." Isaac wondered out loud.

Kunika stared her in confusion (you could practically see the question marks floating over Kunika's head), but she shook it off. "Th-That's why we have to hurry!"

They both picked up the pace. Or rather, Kunika picked up the pace while Isaac and the rabbit tried to follow.

Almost there! Just a few more doors, Kunika thought as she approached a door at the end of the hall. She reached out to grab the handle.

Unfortunately, someone chose that moment to open the door from the other side. Kunika attempted to stop, but alas, her momentum was too great and her attempt to brake actually caused her to trip instead.

"_Abunai!_" Kunika managed to get out before colliding with the unfortunate individual.

Kunika's rabbit got out a squeak of alarm before he too collided with them (you know what they say about pets and their owners). Fortunately, he was not very large so he didn't contribute much to the traffic pile-up.

Isaac, on the other hand, leapt over the disaster zone like a deer and landed just as gracefully on the other side without spilling even a single sheet of paper.

Upon landing, she was greeted with the sound of applause. The source of the clapping came from an olive-skinned, auburn-haired young lady with blue-grey eyes twinkling with delight sitting on a sofa in the base's lounge room. Her black uniform and rank insignia marked her as a _capitano _of the Romagnan Air Force. What made her even more noticeable was a golden brooch on her tie in the shape of a coiled dragon. Clearly, it wasn't part of her country's regular uniform, and she didn't care.

"Nice move. I give that a 10/10. As for the two plus the bunny lying in a pile thereâ€¦"

Isaac turned around to look at the pile-up in the doorway. "Yeah, Kunika always has the worst luck."

The auburn-haired woman, _Capitano_ Adriana Visconti, grinned a grin that would have done the Cheshire cat proud. "_Si_, doesn't

she?"

Kunika slowly raised herself to an upright position, rubbing her throbbing head. "_Ite-teâ€|_" she muttered. Then she heard a muffled squeak behind her. Kunika turned around to find her rabbit buried between a pair of shapely, pale legs covered with thigh-length black socks and black flying boots. "Waka! _Daijyoubu?!_" Kunika shouted with concern as she picked up her brown rabbit. The rabbit in question, Wakamaru (or Waka for short), twitched his nose at Kunika. He looked none the worse for his accident. Apparently, running into someone's, eh, nether regions produced more indignation than injury. "_Yokatta!_ I'm glad you're okay!" Kunika said with relief as she hugged the rabbit to her chest.

"So you reserve your concern for your rabbit and not your commanding officer, _ja?_" A voice said from under Kunika with barely restrained anger.

"Ah?" Kunika looked down to see a blonde, green-eyed girl wearing the black uniform of a Karlsland Night Witch. The girl in question was the 506th Joint Fighter Wing's Commanding Officer in Battle, _Major _Heinrike Prinzessin zu Sayn-Wittgenstein. In other words, Kunika's CO, whom she just knocked down and is currently straddling.

"Erk!" Kunika practically leapt off Wittgenstein. "_Gomennasai! _I'm truly sorry!" She yelled as she bowed in apology.

Heinrike slowly got up, dusted herself off, and glared at Kunika as she went into lecture mode. "Now look, _Oberleutnant_ Kuroda! As a member of nobility, you should strive for nothing less than perfection in performing your duties and grace under pressure. That, _Oberleutnant_, was neither! What kind of example do you think you are showing to the men if you run around like this? Disgraceful!"

All the while, Kunika just kept bowing repeatedly in apology. Honestly, she bore more than a passing resemblance to a dipping bird by this point.

Adriana chose that moment to step in. "Come on, Heinrike. Don't be too hard on the _signorina_, it was just bad luck that she happened to run into you like that. It could've happened to anybody," she said calmly, with a tone one might use with an infuriated cat.

Unfortunately, the cat in question would have none of it.

"Don't use that excuse, _Hauptmann!_ As a member of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing, _Oberleutnant_ Kuroda should display the utmost perfect skill and elegance in any task as befitting her noble blood. And another thing, stop referring to me by 'Heinrike'! It's disrespectful to the chain of command andâ€|"

Adriana had by that point tuned her out. Instead, she picked up one of the fallen reports and looked it over. "Huh, let's seeâ€|huh, the Neuroi have been silent for a while. Feh, maybe they got scared and they're hiding like little _topolini_," she said smugly.

That last bit of information combined with Adriana's dismissive tone snapped Heinrike out of lecture mode. "Are you honestly that

thick-headed? True, in the beginning even my 6-year old sister could have thought up better tactics than they did, but even you should have noticed that they're getting smarter and smarter as the war dragged on. We'd be fools to underestimate them," she said.

Adriana looked contemplative. "You know what? We should be hitting the Neuroi right now; throwing them off-balance instead the other way around," she said.

"You mean flushing them out?" Isaac suggested.

Adriana nodded. "Si, exactly like flushing them out. That way, we can shoot them all down in one fell swoop so we can get at the hives and destroy the Neuroi once and for all!"

Heinrike shook her head. "It won't work. There's no way to tell how many of them are there. The reconnaissance reports from the Nachthexen aren't enough, and daylight reconnaissance is suicide with the anti-air defenses the Neuroi have."

"Like flushing a tiger then. And a man-eating tiger at that," Isaac concluded.

"Ano," Kunika interrupted, holding the stack of reports that'd been scattered on the ground before she collected them. "Would you mind if I can have that back? I still have to deliver these to Commander Grunne," she asked Adriana, who was still holding the report.

"Oh, it's alright. I'll read them here if you don't mind," a soft voice says from across the room.

Kunika snapped around. The source of the voice was a turquoise-eyed woman wearing the black, collared uniform of the Belgican Army with white tights and black flying boots. Her blonde hair was tied back in a braid that encircled the base of her neck. In truth, her appearance was more in line with that of a princess rather than as the Honorary Commander of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing: Wing Commander Rosalie de Hemricourt de Grunne.

She was chosen to be the commander for two reasons: one was her outstanding combat record, the other was her lineage. Being the eldest child of a Belgican duke and a Gallian duchess, she was therefore the heir to both families. She was even in line for the Crown of Britannia, albeit through a distant connection. Though she rarely exercised it and had little desire to do so, Rosalie wielded considerable power and influence amongst the nobility of Europe. It was this woman who was standing there, smiling at Kunika.

Kunika quickly snapped off a salute, nearly dropping her stack of reports again. Fortunately, for once, she caught it before it could fall and handed it over to Rosalie. "Here you go Squadron Leader, ma'am! I have the reports right here!" Kunika shouted stiffly.

Rosalie took it with a smile. "Thank you, Ms. Kunika."

Kunika remained standing stiffly at attention.

Fortunately, Rosalie noticed. "And you don't have to worry. Your pay is quite safe."

Kunika relaxed and sighed in relief.

Isaac remembered what was in her hands and walked over to Rosalie. "Here's the other reports, by the way," she said casually.

"And thank you too, Ms. Isaac," Rosalie thanked.

Rosalie made her way to the sofa with the combined stack of reports. She set it down on the table next to the sofa and began to read through them. When all's said and done, it was quite a hefty stack. Fortunately, her time as a desk jockey had given her the ability to read and analyze reports at a very rapid pace. Rosalie went through the stack like a rabbit through a carrot patch.

"Oh, one more," Adriana said as she handed Rosalie the report she'd been holding.

Rosalie scanned through that report as well.

'_They've been launching raids into our lines since we landed, and now they've suddenly decided to stop? Something's wrong. The Neuroi aren't stupid, at least not always. What are they up to?_' Rosalie thought to herself.

"So what do you think? Too quiet, _si?_" Adriana asked after Rosalie had finished reading the last report.

Rosalie sighed. "You are correct, Ms. Adriana. However, there's not much we can do at this point. We just simply lack enough information on the Neuroi lines to do anything more than react to what they throw at us."

Heinrike lost her temper and slammed her foot into the floor. "_Verdammt!_" Can't we do anything other than respond to what the Neuroi do?! If we just keep reacting to whatever they send over the Rhine, we'll never regain the initiative!"

Adriana snapped her fingers. "I got an idea. How about we go take a reconnaissance flight of our own? And while we're at it, we smash up some of their AA and make it easier for the other witches," she suggested.

Heinrike glared at her. "Are you insane? Those AA sites the Neuroi have on the riverbank are accurate enough at _night_! Do you want to give them an easier target to shoot down?!"

"Well it beats sitting around waiting for the Neuroi to do something, doesn't it? If you've got a better plan, why don't you tell us, o great Squadron Leader?" Adriana asked mockingly.

If looks could kill, the impact of the two witches' glares would have caused a nuclear fusion reaction that would have incinerated not only the base, but most of the surrounding countryside as well. Kunika and Isaac looked back and forth at them nervously. Waka, sensing the tension, decided to do the smart thing and hid behind his owner's leg.

Suddenly, there was a loud thump. All of them turned to look at Wing Commander de Grunne with her hands on the table where she'd slammed

them down, hard. Hard enough to crack the surface.

"Now why don't we all calm down and relax, okay? Ms. Heinrike? Ms. Adriana?" Wing Commander de Grunne suggested in a tone that was both a suggestion and a command.

The two of them stopped glaring at each other and allowed the tension to go back down to something less stifling. Rosalie relaxed and she went back to her usual self.

"There, now-"

A wailing cry echoed through the base, the sound of the air raid siren instantly dispelling whatever it was she was about to say.

Wing Commander de Grunne reached up and switched on her throat mike. "Radar control, what's the situation?" she asked, all traces of her former gentleness gone as she went into combat mode.

"**Ma'am, we've got 5 contacts on radar, heading to one of our forward bases. It looks a large Neuroi on a bombing run with 2 mediums and 4 smaller Neuroi flying in formation around it in an escort pattern.**"

"Understood. We'll be scrambling immediately." She took her finger off her ear. "You heard the man, move out!"

Every one of the witches heads to the hangar, hurrying without getting in each other's way as they'd learned to do in the time they've been here.

"Escorts, huh. And it looks like they're sending a mix of units this time. That's unusual," said Heinrike, thinking about how the Neuroi usually either send in swarms of a single type or just a single powerful unit.

"So what if they're sending more than one type at once? Who cares? They're just more kills for my tally," Adriana said dismissively.

"But if they are doing something new, shouldn't we be more careful?" Kunika asked.

"The most dangerous game is one that can think and reason. I'm bringing more ammo for my Solothurn, just in case," Isaac said.

"As Kunika said, this is unusual behavior from the Neuroi, so watch it out there," Squadron Leader de Grunne concluded.

"Roger!" everyone shouted.

Arriving at the hangar, Adriana, Kunika, and Isaac grabbed their weapons from beside their Strikers. Only they would be going on sortie. Rosalie was staying behind due to her failing magic as she was nearing 20. Instead, she served as A-unit's operator, relaying information and coordinates to the squadron during combat as well as planning tactics and strategies for them. Heinrike was needed for night missions, so she'll be staying behind as well, admittedly with extreme reluctance considering how her hand was twitching near her

avored Beretta M1934 pistol in its hip holster.

Adriana grabbed her favorite weapon, a 9-barreled rocket launcher firing 20mm HE rockets from the rack beside her Striker. Designated the "Fliegerhammer" by the Karlslandan scientists who developed it, it had a maximum range of 500 meters, though its unguided nature forced many witches to move in much closer than that before firing. As backup weapons, she carried a Beretta Modello 38 submachine gun from her homeland as well as a dozen Liberion Mk. 2 hand grenades in a bandolier.

Kunika's weapon of choice was a Type 99 light machine gun she brought from Fuso. While she has had trouble obtaining the 7.7x58mm Arisaka ammunition for it in Gallia, it had served her well during her time there so she continued to use it. It originally came with a Fuso-style sword bayonet, but she quickly realized how useless it was when it became apparent that the weapon's flash hider obstructed the bayonet too much to make it be useful. Instead, she now kept it in its scabbard on her belt for use as a backup weapon (though the only thing she's ever cut with it so far were fruits and vegetables). Aside from that, she carried no sidearm, instead using the extra space to carry more magazines for her Type 99.

Isaac's weapon was even longer than she was tall, at almost 216 cm (7 ft 1 in) compared to her 162 cm (5 ft 4 in). It was called the Solothurn S-18/1000 anti-tank rifle. Isaac tended to think of the Neuroi as really big game animals, so she had asked Squadron Leader Wittgenstein for the biggest rifle she could think of, hence this monster. It fired the 20x138mmB Long Solothurn round, which was available in a variety of ammunition types. Its high caliber combined with its high velocity added to Isaac's magic made the Solothurn rifle powerful enough to dispatch most smaller Neuroi with a single shot. For a sidearm, Isaac preferred to carry a Britannian Webley Mk VI revolver for its high caliber and stopping power with a couple of speedloaders for it in one pouch and loose rounds in another pouch.

After grabbing their weapons, they ran over to and jumped into their Striker Units: flying machines made by combining magic and technology in order for witches to more effectively fight Neuroi. They not only allowed the witches to fly with great speed and agility, they also increased the strength of the witches' magic shield and enhanced the witches' physical abilities to the point where they could wield even crew-served weaponry as if they were regular firearms.

Adriana's machine was a Romagna-made MC.205V striker, nicknamed the "_Veltro_". As she started it up, the tufted ears and fluffy tail of a caracalâ€"her familiarâ€"popped out and a magic circle appeared underneath her. Her Striker's magic propellers popped out as green blades and started up with a whir. "This is _Capitano_ Visconti, taking off!" she shouted as she sped through the open door of the hangar.

As Isaac jumped into her Ultramarine Spitfire Mk XXII striker, the grey, floppy ears of a Bouviers des Flandres dog as well as the accompanying tail popped out. "Pilot Officer Bergendal here, I'm taking off!" she shouted as she followed after Adriana.

Kunika's Striker was originally a Ki-43 striker brought over from Fuso. Unfortunately, it broke down upon her arrival in Gallia. While

it was being repaired, Kunika decided to use a Karlsland-made Messerscharf Bf. 109K striker as a replacement. She has since then become quite fond of the Bf. 109K and has continued to use it despite her Ki-43 being fully repaired. In her case, as she started up her Striker, the pointed ears and curly tail of a Shiba Inu dog popped out. "Kuroda-chÅ«i_, I mean, First Lieutenant Kuroda, taking off!" she shouted as she took off after the other two at full speed, nearly clipping a maintenance crane in the process.

Soon, the three of them were off in the sky heading towards the five Neuroi.

* * *

><p>506***th**** A-Unit Base Ops Center**

Wing Commander Rosalie de Hemricourt de Grunne

1050 hours

In the base's ops center, Rosalie and Heinrike stared at the contacts on the radar screen over the radar operator's shoulder. Waka had followed them and was sitting next to Rosalie's feet, his second-favorite person after Kunika. The 3 witches heading towards the Neuroi were shown as a group of green dots while the much larger Neuroi looked more like splotches on the screen.

"What's the ETA until those Neuroi reach the forward base?" Wing Commander de Grunne asked.

"ETA is 35 minutes. They have until then to shoot them down," the radar operator reported calmly.

"Only 35 minutes. Is that going to be enough time?" Heinrike wondered worriedly.

Just then, Rosalie heard a voice coming from the long-range radio unit behind her. **"This is Lieutenant Colonel Preddy, does anyone copy, over?"** a quiet voice asked with a Britannish accent.

Rosalie went over and answered the radio. "This is Rosalie, I copy. What's the situation, Geena?"

I'm reporting the deployment of B-Unit for the interception of the Neuroi group headed for the Allied forward base near the no man's land. What's the status of A-Unit?

'_Oh, dear.'_

Rosalie looked back at the radar screen. Sure enough, there were three more green dots heading towards the same group of Neuroi A-Unit had been sent to dispatch.

"â€|**A-Unit has been deployed as well, haven't they?"**

Rosalie sighed. "Yes."

***Thisâ€|could get sticky then."** Geena concluded.

Heinrike facepalmed herself. "_ScheiÃŸe._ That's an understatement if

I've ever heard one."

* * *

><p>Somewhere over northeastern Gallia

****First Lieutenant Kunika Kuroda****

****1050 hours****

"Uh, Visconti-san, where are the Neuroi?" Kunika asked as they were speeding above the clouds towards their targets.

"They're close. Should be any minute now. Isaac, do you see anything from up there?"

The 3 witches flew in a loose formation at staggered heights, with Isaac keeping watch above the other two through the scope of her Solothurn rifle.

"I see the Neuroi. One large Neuroi with two mediums flying on either side and four smaller Neuroi flying in tight formation around it just like the radar operator said. The Large Neuroi is a Manta-class. The two mediums are Laros-class. I don't recognize the 4 others though. They look like long tubes with blunt noses and long swept-back wings with T-tails. They're probably new," Isaac reported.

"Heh. New or not, my Fliegerhammer's going to smash them into dust," Adriana declared.

Then a voice erupted in the two witches' ear radios. ****"This is Rosalie, do you copy?"****

"I copy, go ahead." Adriana answered.

****"According to Lieutenant Colonel Preddy, B-Unit has been sent here as well, so watch where you're shooting."****

'_Ah! Marian-san, Jennifer-chan, and Carla-chan are going to come too! Yes!_' _Kunika thought happily.

Adriana meanwhile, scoffed. "B-Unit? We don't need those Liberions to help us. We can take care of these Neuroi by ourselves."

Kunika was a bit flustered by that remark and laughed nervously. "_Ano-_"

"Two of the new Neuroi just broke away from formation! They're heading right for us!" Isaac shouted.

"Kuroda, on me! We'll hit them as they come for us! Isaac, snipe them from afar and expose their cores for us, will you?!" Adriana shouted.

"_Hai!_"

"Roger."

The two of them readied their weapons, while Isaac aimed down the scope of her Solothurn at one of the approaching Neuroi. As she

stared down the scope at them, she noticed that the Neuroi had a hole at its nose surrounded by red weapons panels.

'_Hm, that's odd. Wonder what's that hole for? Oh well, it doesn't matter, as long as I can shoot it down,'_ she thought.

When she'd judged the Neuroi to be about 3 kilometers out, she pulled the trigger. The massive rifle bucked in her hands, sending a 20mm HEI-T round at the Neuroi at about 850 m/s. At that range, it would've taken about 3.5 seconds to reach its target, plenty of time to dodge it. The only reason Isaac fired at that range was because the Neuroi usually didn't dodge.

In this case though, this Neuroi did dodge, swerving to one side.

"Tch!" _'They're usually too dumb to even do that. I guess they're learning or they're training them better, however the bloody hell they're training them anyway,'_ thought Isaac.

"Did you get it?" Adriana asked.

"Wait, hold on!"

Isaac then activated her magic ability, Trajectory Manipulation. Classified in the Telekinesis System Lineage of magic, it was similar to the Ballistic Stabilization ability except that the former allowed the user a greater degree of control over the bullet's flight path. The degree of control was so great, Isaac could even make the bullet chase a Neuroi across the sky if she concentrated hard enough, though it lost muzzle velocity quickly if used in that regard.

In any rate, Isaac waited until the HEI-T bullet was only a hundred meters away from the Neuroi before suddenly swerving it into the black alien craft. The bullet erupted onto the Neuroi skin in a blinding flash of RDX high explosives and zinc incendiaries, sending chunks of Neuroi falling off that quickly crumbled into white shards upon being separated from the main body.

Isaac grinned behind the scope of her rifle. It was the grin of a hunter who'd successfully hit her prey. "Got it. Just a couple more shots and-"

Suddenly, Isaac saw the back of the Neurois glow and erupt in white light. The 2 Neurois rocketed forward at extremely high speeds.

"Watch out!"

Adriana and Kunika had heard Isaac's warning and seen the white glow erupt from the two black dots in the distance. Even then, they only just had time to put up their shields before laser fire hammered against them like a horizontal hailstorm. They couldn't even get their weapons up before the Neuroi rocketed through their formation, throwing them off-balance with ear-shattering sonic booms and leaving behind trails of condensation.

As it passed by Kunika, she managed to note the new Neuroi's design despite the high speed of the alien craft using her magic ability, Three-Dimensional Target Analysis. Classified in the Perception

Lineage of magic, this ability allowed Kunika to quickly analyze and discern information about any single unit within a 500 meter radius regardless of whether it was in her line of sight or not. Her ability basically allowed her to examine the entire surface of her target in an instant, as if it were a 3D model. The catch was that she could only focus on one target at a time. Anything she wasn't focused on appeared as a fuzzy blur to her senses. She would be aware of its presence and general shape, but that was it.

As for the new Neuroi, Kunika noted that the Isaac's description of them was mostly accurate, save for the hole (which for some reason was bisected into two halves) at the front that seemed to lead into a hollow cavity running through its body, which led to some kind of exhaust port at the rear of the tube, which appeared to be the source of their impressive speed. She also noted something else: all of the red hexagonal panelsâ€”indicating weapon portsâ€”were surrounding the hole on its nose. She realized it must be specialized for attack instead of defense. Kunika then noticed the two Neuroi were now heading straight for Isaac. "Isaac-chan! Look out!" she shouted.

The Neuroi were already firing at Isaac as Kunika shouted out her warning. Isaac managed to only snap off a single shot, so thick was the storm of lasers directed against her. It smashed against the nose of the leading Neuroi, destroying some of its weapon ports and quite possibly saving her own life. As it was, she just managed to swerve out of the way of the laser fire and blocked the ones she couldn't dodge with her shield as the two Neuroi rocketed past her. Isaac quickly rejoined Kunika and Adriana after that.

"_Cazzo!_ What was that?!" Adriana cursed. "How did they get so fast?!"

"Maybe that white flame coming from their rears are the reason for that?" Kunika suggested, before wincing and laughing nervously from Adriana's glare for pointing out the obvious.

"Wing Commander, did you see those Neuroi, specifically their speed?" Isaac asked.

"**Yes. These are the fastest Neuroi we've ever seen. We've estimated their speeds to be at almost Mach 1 and climbing. I'm currently working with Ms. Heinrike to come up with a strategy to defeat them. In the meantime, be careful.**"

"They're coming around for another pass," Isaac, using the scope of her Solothurn, reported.

"Kuroda, Isaac, open up on them! Keep them from getting a bead on us!" Adriana ordered.

Isaac fired at the two Neuroi at about 8 kilometers, using her ability to steer the bullets into the Neuroi. The Neuroi she'd hit before had already recovered by then and it and its partner waited until just before they hit before dodging. Despite her best efforts, only two of Isaac's bullets hit the Neuroi by the time her weapon clicked empty. Not only that, one was a glancing hit that barely did any damage. Isaac cursed herself as she frantically reloaded, but she knew she wouldn't make it before they opened up on her and her team.

Kunika opened up on them with her Type 99 as soon as she saw the black dots in the distance. At that range, her chances of hitting them with her LMG were about the same as if she were firing with her eyes closed. She quickly realized her mistake and ceased fire, but not before expending 24 rounds out of her current 30-round magazine. She scrambled to reload, but the Neuroi had already closed the distance while she was still inserting a new mag.

Adriana fired all nine rockets in her Fliegerhammer at the two Neuroi. The unguided nature of the rockets meant that the Neuroi were easily able to dodge and weave through the rockets' flight trajectories—or so they thought. When the rockets were directly in front of the Neuroi, Adriana activated her magic ability, Blast Force, with a snap of her fingers. Classified in the Attack Lineage of magic, Blast Force allowed Adriana to imbue an object with an explosive ether. The ether could turn each bullet into a mini-grenade and it even enhanced the power of explosive weaponry. The projectile automatically exploded on contact with its target, but it also exploded if the user stopped focusing on it. While this could be a recipe for disaster if the witch lost concentration, it could also allow the witch in question to detonate the projectile on command by simply ceasing their focus on it, such as in this case.

Adriana started to grin, as she thought the Neuroi were going too fast to avoid the billowing cloud of flames and shrapnel. But then the two Neuroi appeared from behind the explosions, only just barely scraping the edges of the deadly clouds. The three witches had to cease their attacks and put up their shields as the Neuroi hammered them with laser fire once more before zooming through their formation and disappearing again into the distance.

"Feh! Those things are more maneuverable than I thought. Looks like only a direct hit is going to work against these things," said Adriana.

"Ehh?! But didn't you see how fast they were! How are we supposed to hit those things!" Kunika pointed out.

"Not just that. These guys can fire faster and farther than previous Neuroi. They'll just sweep through us again if we do the same thing," Isaac also pointed out.

Adriana thought for a moment. "Then we just split up and force them to spread out their fire. That way, we can outflank them while they—"

"It won't work," Isaac interrupted. "At their speed, neither you nor Kunika will be able to see them coming before they hit you. That plan of yours will just give them a chance to pick us off one by one, like calves that have strayed from the protection of the herd."

"We're not cows," Adriana said testily.

"No, but we might as well be with those wolves after us," Isaac countered.

The two of them glared at each other in a battle of wills while Kunika watched nervously as her friends and squadron mates now seem to be more interested in fighting with each other than with the Neuroi.

'_Uwaah! We just don't have enough witches for this. If only we had more witches on our side, we could-'_

"Kunikaaa!" A voice called from some distance behind Kunika, interrupting her thoughts.

She turned around just in time for a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl wearing the blue collared suit, white undershirt, and necktie of the United States of Liberion Marine Corps (USMC for short) to crash into her while collecting her in a warm embrace, both literally and figuratively since she had been flying at maximum speed for the entire trip from Dijon and was sweating like a pig. The hug was so sudden, she nearly clobbered Kunika over the head with her massive M3 autocannon, the US production of the Hispano Suiza HS.404 Mk. V in service with Britannia.

"Jennifer-chan, you've made it!" Kunika exclaimed happily as she returned the hug, who in turn nearly brained the Liberion girl with her Type 99 in her eagerness (though in truth, the M3 would have hurt a lot more).

Captain Jennifer J. DeBlanc giggled at the return hug. "Ah, but I'm not the only one," she said as she pointed back in the direction she came from.

Two dots were rapidly approaching into view, quickly becoming discernable as two witches wearing Liberion uniforms. One wore the dress blues of the USMC like Jennifer with her blond hair streaming about her as she flew. The other wore the olive drab coat of the US Army Air Force with a white scarf wrapped around her neck and had a paler shade of blonde hair tied into a pair of unbraided pigtails trailing behind her.

The sight of Jennifer and the approaching witches had caused Adriana and Isaac to break off their argument.

"Oh, great. The Liberions are here," Adriana muttered.

Isaac meanwhile, was staring at the sight of Jennifer still hugging Kunika. '_So this is the 'Jennifer-chan' Kunika talks about? What's so great about her? I don't see anything special about her. What does she have that I don't?_' went through Isaac's mind as she stared, no, glared at Jennifer.

While Kunika was happily oblivious to the hostility being directed at her friend, Jennifer was not of the same mind. She wasn't bothered by it though. In fact she was curious. However, she decided to ignore it for the time being to concentrate on her happy reunion.

The blond witch in USMC dress blues was the first to arrive. She stared at the sight of Kunika and Jessica hugging in the middle of a battle. "You girls do realize we're in the middle of a raging battle against aliens from God-knows-where, do you?" she asked sarcastically.

Jennifer pouted at the blond girl. "Oh, come on, Marian! It's just for a moment. Don't be such a spoilsport."

While Captain Marian E. Carl was not particularly a stickler for

rules, even she felt they needed to be enforced in this case. "Look, Jennifer." A vein had begun to bulge on Marian's temple from her anger. "Don't you have night patrol? Should you really be wasting your time with this?"

Jennifer's response was to stick her tongue out at her superior. "Aw, lighten up. I can just take a nap right before I go. Besides, the Princess does that all the time," Jennifer said, using one of Heinrike's other nicknames (by the way, she particularly hates this one).

Meanwhile, Jennifer's answer didn't satisfy Marian. If anything, the pulsing vein on her temple got bigger. "That's not the point." Marian ground out.

Adriana, who'd been watching the scene, observed Marian with interest. "Well, I'd thought all of you Liberions were loose and fun-loving. I never thought one of you would be as straight-laced as Heinrike," she said with a smirk.

"**I heard that, **_**Hauptmann**_** Visconti."** Heinrike said testily over the radio.

Next to Marian, the blond girl with the twin pigtails, First Lieutenant Carla J. Luksic, had long since arrived and was now pointing with her specially modified M2 Browning machine gun at the horizon and said, "Shouldn't you guys be worrying less about arguing and more on the Neuroi that can fly past the speed of sound?"

As if on cue, two black dots appeared in the distance where Carla just happened to be pointing. The witches quickly raised their shields as the black dots rapidly grew larger and fired barrages of laser fire at the girls.

As the two Neuroi rocketed past the witches once more, Jennifer shook her fist at them. "Hey, you _capullos_! How dare you ruin our touching reunion!" she screamed angrily at the retreating dots while still shaking her little fist at them. Her magic antennae manifested itself as a glowing circular radar display in front of her right eye, glowing red this time due to her anger. After a few more seconds of Jennifer throwing a fit, she turned back to the other witches, huffing and puffing at her little show of anger. "Okay, I'm ready. Now let's kick their shiny, metal asses so we can actually have a proper reunion," she said, still huffing and puffing.

Marian grinned. "Now that's what I'm talking about! Alright, witches! Form up on me, we'll go blast these Neuroi apart!"

With a loud cheer, the three Liberion witches roared off in pursuit of the Neuroi.

Which happened to have left behind a certain _very_ ticked-off Romagnan witch in their wake. "Well, come on! Do you want them to steal our kills out from under us?!" Adriana shouted.

"No!" Isaac shouted, though she was more concerned about Jennifer showing her up than anything else.

Kunika knew this was the wrong way to deal with the Neuroi.
"_Anoâ€¦!_"

"_Bene!_ Now let's go after them! _Presto!_"

Before poor Kunika could get anything out, Adriana and Isaac had already zoomed off after the Liberions in their mad pursuit. Breaking into cold sweat, Kunika zoomed off after them, if only to avoid getting separated. She had a bad feeling about how this was going to end.

* * *

><p>Captain Jennifer J. DeBlanc

1061 hours

'_Those _hijos de punta_, I'll teach them to shoot at my friends!_'_ thought Jennifer as she and her squadron raced after the Neuroi. And she had the skills and guts to do just that.

Unfortunately, she had to catch them first. As for how that was turning outâ€|

"Is it just me, or are they getting away from us?" Carla asked. The shrinking black dots of the Neuroi seemed to prove her point.

"Come on! Let's go faster!" Jennifer shouted, trying to push the engines of her night-black Grumman F7F-3N Tigercat striker past its maximum speed.

"In case you haven't noticed, we're already redlining our engines and they're still faster than we are. Damn bastards," Marian muttered.

Jennifer glanced at her superior officer and saw a strange mixture of anger and envy warring on Marian's face. Despite her anger, Jennifer almost giggled as she thought of how speed-obsessed Marian was and how she must be fuming at the thought of the Neuroi being faster than her.

"Alright, cut your engines! We're not going to catch them this way," Marian finally ordered.

Jennifer was about to protest when she noticed the black dots in the distance suddenly crossed each other and started getting bigger. "Look out!"

The three Liberions got their shields up just in time as laser fire slammed into them, sending them rocking back from the impacts. The Neuroi, having finished another attack run, rocketed through their formation, leaving white contrails and some very off-balance witches behind.

"Shit! After them!" Marian shouted, initiating a pursuit back in the direction they came from.

Unfortunately, they had no idea of the disaster they were about to fly into.

* * *

><p>First Lieutenant Kunika Kuroda

****1062 hours****

"They're coming this way!" Isaac shouted as the black dots in the distance rapidly increased in size.

"All witches, engage!" Adriana shouted.

All three witches followed this order with varying degrees of action. Isaac halted her flight. Remembering what'd happened the last time she tried to engage them directly, she decided to try something different this time. She started firing her Solothurn in seemingly random directions confined only to a wide cone in front of her.

Meanwhile, Kunika, also remembering her abominable accuracy before, decided to hold her fire until the Neuroi were close enough to at least have a realistic chance of hitting them. The time window would only be a second or two considering the Neuroi's high speed, but it would be far better than wasting her ammo trying to hit them from afar.

Adrian, who'd also held her fire, was about to pull the trigger on her Fliegerfaust when suddenly, one of the Neuroi was staggered by small explosions, screeching in agony as 20mm HEI bullets smashed into it from multiple angles.

Isaac had been using her Trajectory Manipulation to steer the 20mm bullets from her Solothurn into the Neuroi from unorthodox directions. Sure, the bullets lost a lot of velocity by they reached their targets, but the HEI payload they carried made up for the lack of muzzle velocity. Isaac had fired her entire 10-round magazine at the two Neuroi-well, one of the Neuroi. Considering she had to control 10 different projectiles and steer them into their target, just trying to hit one target was difficult enough.

Despite her control however, some things still inevitably went wrong. 2 of the bullets missed completely and another 3 scored only glancing hits, bouncing off and doing nothing but creasing the Neuroi's tough skin.

The other 5 though, were direct hits. One took its left wingtip off. Another smashed its main body and took a big chunk of Neuroi off. 2 of them hit next to each other near the base of its other and basically sawed the wing off, sending it tumbling away and crumbing into white shards. The last one should have been a miss like its unfortunate brethren, but the loss of one wing left the Neuroi off-balance. This caused it swerve into the path of the bullet which allowed the bullet to hit a critical spot on the Neuroi: its exhaust port.

The now deformed exhaust port caused the Neuroi to spiral out of control and slam into its brethren, knocking it away. The out of control Neuroi screamed as it more-or-less spiraled into the general direction of the 3 witches, but in its current state was unable to shoot at them.

Adriana saw her chance and fired her entire 9-round clip at the Neuroi. Most of them missed, but two-by chance-smashed into the

Neuroi, one of them piercing the core and smashing it into oblivion. With its core destroyed, the rest of the Neuroi exploded into white shards that drifted down like falling snow.

Adrian, ecstatic from her victory, allowed the rest of her rockets to self-destruct.

Had she remembered who was chasing the Neuroi, she would not have been so quick to self-destruct them.

* * *

><p>Captain Jennifer J. DeBlanc

1062 hours

Jennifer lifted up her 20mm autocannon and aimed down its sights at the distant Neuroi. _'Almost there-'_

Jennifer's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by one of the Neuroi suddenly staggering in the air.

"What the-"

Then the Neuroi exploded and several fireballs erupted less than a hundred meters in front of her and her wingmates.

"Shit! Evade, evade!" Marian screamed.

But it was no use. Their flight speed was just too great to change their courses. A second later, they flew right through the expanding explosions and the clouds of shrapnel they were generating. Had they been mundane soldiers, they would have been shredded into hamburger by the fast-moving fragments of metal. Luckily for them, they had their magic shields that blocked the shrapnel and prevented that potentially gruesome fate.

Unfortunately, while the shields prevented the shrapnel from getting through, the heat and flames of the explosions themselves billowed around their shields, exposing their bodies to some painfully high temperatures. The only one of the witches who didn't get burned was Carla Luksic, and that was only because of her magic ability, Ether Cooling, which allowed her to cool anything down using ether and generated a more-or-less permanent bubble of cold air around her due to the ether present in the atmosphere, so she felt a warm breeze on her instead. The other two weren't so lucky and got first and second-degree burns from the explosions.

The effects were as followed:

1. It was extremely painful (save for Carla).
2. The ammunition that wasn't in their pockets cooked off from the heat, causing further injuries and destroying their primary weapons (again, save for Carla, you lucky girl).
3. They had to cover their eyes to protect them from the explosion (alas, even Carla did this reflexively).

It was the third effect that was responsible for what happened

immediately afterwards.

* * *

><p>First Lieutenant Kunika Kuroda

1062 hours

Kunika and her wingmates watched the remaining Neuroi stabilize its flight path, turn, and zoom away screeching its fury at having its wingmate destroyed.

Adriana and Isaac prepared to give chase to the remaining Neuroi. Kunika started to do the same, but she was distracted by something she thought she heard when Adriana's rockets self-destructed.

'_Were thoseâ€|screams?_' she wondered worriedly.

Kunika quickly activated her magic ability. She sensed that 3 units were headed right for her flight. Since she couldn't analyze all of them, she focused on the one flying right at her. To her shock and horror, it was Jennifer, and she had terrible burns on her face and hands and her once navy blue uniform was scorched black at her shoulders and upper arms. Kunika also detected shrapnel buried in her friend's hands and also saw that the cause was the Johnson LMG's chamber bursting as the round in it cooked off.

"_Abunai!_" Kunika screamed.

Both Adriana and Isaac started to turn around just as Marian and Carla collided with them respectively, sending them all tumbling in the air.

* * *

><p>506***th**** A-Unit Base Ops Center**

Wing Commander Rosalie de Hemricourt de Grunne

1062 hours

Rosalie was looking down in dismay and Heinrike was groaning with a hand pressed against her face as they listened to the chaos unfolding in the air.

"I knew it might turn out to be bad with those two units out there, but this?" Heinrike groaned. "_Mein gott._"

Well what kind of results do you think we're going to get from two units who never work together? Bloody hell, our units don't even **_**talk**_** to one another. Geena said over the radio.

Rosalie looked down again, but this time it was in shame. "I'm sorry, Geena. If I'd been more forceful with them, then maybe-"

Don't be. I was there, remember? I still remember how pompous those blue-blooded brainless idiots were. There was no way in hell anything you said could have convinced them. They've got their heads jammed so far up their collective noble arses, they need to pipe in air through their royal navels.

Rosalie couldn't quite suppress a rueful smirk. "I can't tell if you're trying to make me feel better or not."

"**Am I? I'm pretty sure I'm just venting my frustrations against idiots in high places. If it makes you feel better, I'll just call it an unintended side effect.**"

Rosalie couldn't quite suppress a giggle this time. Even Heinrike felt her spirits being lifted after that exchange.

After Rosalie was finished with her moment of hilarity, she cleared her throat and said, "Well then, I suppose we should put our heads together and come up with some kind of a plan to deal with these new Neuroi. That's what we're here for, after all."

"**Agreed. Squadron Leader Wittgenstein, would you mind lending us your noggin as well?**"

Heinrike bristled at the suggestion. "Of course, I would. I mean, I wouldn't. I meanâ€|agh! Of course I'll help! _Verdammt Britanisch,_ " she muttered under her breath.

Rosalie smiled at her vice-commander's fervent reply and switched off her ear radio in order to focus on planning. She worked far better without distractions. "Good. Now let's beginâ€|"

* * *

><p>Somewhere over northeastern Gallia

First Lieutenant Kunika Kuroda

1062 hours

Kunika, meanwhile, quickly spread her arms out and propelled herself backwards, gradually decreasing speed to match up with Jennifer's forward momentum so that the impact didn't jar her injured friend.

"Jennifer-chan, are you okay?!" Kunika asked worriedly as they were hovering there, carefully holding her friend by her uninjured arms.

Jennifer slowly opened her eyes. "Ow, ow, ow. Wait, hold on." Jennifer closed her eyes again and a soft blue glow enveloped her entire body as she used her magic ability, Metabolic Healing. Classified in the telekinesis lineage of magic, Metabolic Healing works by increasing the natural healing speed of a target organism to several times normal speed, allowing the target to recover from even life-threatening wounds. Her powers can even be used on herself, as in this case.

Jennifer hissed in pain as her burns quickly started to knit together and any shrapnel in her was pushed out by her magic. She only had to endure it for a few seconds though before her wounds had completely closed up with nary a mark on her. When it was over, she sighed with relief.

"There, that's better, now," Jennifer's eyes widened as she

remembered what had happened. "Oh, shit! Marian! Carla!" she shouted as she rushed over to where her two wingmates had finally stopped tumbling with Kunika following closely behind.

"Agh! Get off me, get off!" Marian screamed as she flailed out of Adriana's grasp.

"Hey, what's wrong?! Why are you-" Adriana cut herself off as she noticed the burn marks on Marian's face and arms. "How did-" Again, Adriana cut herself off and her olive complexion turned several shades paler as she realized that it was the result of her own explosions that'd injured the Liberion witch. "I-I'm sorry, I-"

"Excuse me! Coming through!" Jennifer unintentionally interrupted as she shoved Adriana aside in her haste to get to Marian. "Are you okay, Marian? How many fingers am I holding up?"

Marian blinked at the strange question. "Three, I guess? Does your thumb count as a finger?" she asked.

Jennifer looked at her right hand and saw that indeed she was holding up two fingers plus her thumb. "Okay, good. No concussion. Now hold still." She said quickly as she held her hands against Marian's wounds. Marian's sharp hiss of pain as her wounds began healing at an accelerated pace was in sharp contrast to the soft blue glow emanating from Jennifer's hands. "Carla! Are you hurt anywhere?!" Jennifer shouted while she continued healing Marian.

Carla untangled herself from Isaac's grasp and looked herself over. After which, she flashed Jennifer a thumbs-up. "Nope. Not a scratch on me," the blond witch answered cheerfully.

'_Lucky girl,'_ the witches thought, save for Adriana.

The Romagnan witch was staring down, lost in her guilt at causing this. After Jennifer had finished healing Marian, Adriana flew in front of Marian. She swallowed her pride and said, "Look, I'm sorry, for what it's worth. I didn't know you three were flying towards us, soã€|"

Marian glared at her with a gaze that matched a blizzard in intensity and temperature. She as still quite angry that Adriana had almost gotten her flight killed. "_You didn't know? _Well maybe if you'd bothered to check with us on the radio, then maybe we could have avoided getting our asses burned like that."

Adriana's cheeks flushed with anger in response to that cold delivery. "Well I would have if your radios were set to the same frequency as ours!" she shouted hotly.

"Well maybe if your commander had not agreed to split our wing into two units separated by over 180 miles, we would be using the same frequency," Marian retorted coldly.

Adriana's anger was now burning like a flame, completely overriding her guilt from earlier. "It's not as if she wanted to! Those _bastardos_ who call themselves 'nobles' forced it on her!"

"Oh? So your commander is weak-willed in addition to being

ineffective? I feel sorry for you girls in A-Unit then."

That, unfortunately, set Adriana off like a detonator on a block of C4. Despite Adriana's general lack of respect for authority, she has become quite fond of her commanding officer due to her honest and kind nature. "What was that, you _puttana?!_" she shouted angrily as she advanced on her.

Normally, Marian was able to keep her cool even in tense situations. However, the combination of watching the witches under her command almost being killed by an "in her opinion" "idiotic mistake by an officer who should've known better and the residual and remembered pain from her own injuries have made her extremely hostile towards the officer in question. Also, while Marian spoke not a word of Romagnan, only a complete moron would have not noticed the extreme hostility in Adriana's voice. Marian crossed her arms and said coldly, "You heard me, bitch. If your commander hadn't bent to those nobles, the 506th would be one unit and this whole snafu would never have happened."

You could almost see their respective auras opposing one another. Adriana's aura was that of a dragon wreathed in flames, hissing out tongues of fire with each breath. Marian's was not a dragon, but a mighty 8-legged warhorse with a mane and fetlocks of flowing ice, breathing out blasts of subzero air from its nostrils with each snort.

Fortunately, before the fight became too serious, the two parties' wingwomen intervened. For the several minutes that Adriana and Marian's fight had been building up, their wingwomen had been huddled together discussing what to do if their respective commanding officers got too out of hand. They had also decided on a codeword to use while they were at it. "Suppression Plan Alpha, go!" Jennifer shouted. "_Banzai!_" Kunika shouted as well.

Within moments, both Adriana and Marian were restrained by a pair of witches each. Kunika and Isaac restrained the former, while Jennifer and Carla the latter.

"Calm down, Adriana-san! You were supposed to be apologizing to Marian-san, remember?" Kunika said frantically.

"Like hell I'm going to apologize to that stuck-up _puttana!_"

"Calm down. You screwed up. We all did. Get over it." Isaac said bluntly.

Adriana visibly deflated upon hearing that.

"And why the fuck are you two restraining me?" Marian asked testily to her two wingwomen.

"Just in case" Jennifer began cheerfully.

"A miracle happens and you actually lose it." Carla ended just as cheerfully.

You could almost see the vein bulge out slightly on Marian's temple. "You seriously thought I'd lose it over something like that?" she asked testily.

They both shrugged in response, leaving their commanding officer to simmer.

Just then, the A-Unit's ear radios squawked. **"Hello? Are you still there? I think we've come up with a plan to destroy those Neuroi!"** Rosalie said excitedly.

"_Mattekudasai,_" said Kunika, accidentally slipping into Fusoan.

"Pardon?" Though Rosalie spoke many languages, Fusoan was not one of them.

"Uh, hold on."

Just then, Adriana struggled free of her wingmates' trip. "I'm fine, go ahead," she said quickly into her ear radio.

"Are you okay, Ms. Adriana? You sound off. Did something happen that I need to be aware of?"

"No."

"Right, then. Would you please tell B-Unit to set their radio frequency to match ours? It would be much easier to coordinate that way."

Adriana nodded, even though her commander couldn't see the gesture, and said to Kunika, "Tell B-Unit to switch to our frequency."

Kunika looked back at B-Unit in consternation. Even though they were only a few feet away, Adriana wasn't even talking to them. Jennifer and Carla shrugged in sympathy and began switching their radio frequencies. Marian, however, just crossed her arms. "Why should I?" she said coldly.

Suddenly, Marian's ear radio squawked. **"Do it,"** the familiar voice of Lieutenant Colonel Preddy ordered into her ear quietly but firmly.

Marian's eyes widened in surprise. **"How did she?"** Then she remembered. Her commander's power was Hawkeye, a magic ability in the Perception Lineage that allowed her commander to see and track targets at ranges far, far beyond what a human should normally be able to see. She'd likely been watching the whole exchange.

Marian reached up to press her throat mike. "But, Colonel-"

"No buts. Focus on the Neuroi. Ignore all else. That's all. Oh, and Captain Carl?"

Marian knew with almost 100% certainty what was coming. "Yes, Colonel?"

"You were out of line. Extremely out of line. I'll not have you slandering a superior officer. Is that clear, Captain Carl?"

Marian looked down in shame. She knew she had gone far out of line

and was ashamed that she'd lost her temper. "Yes, ma'am. It won't happen again."

"**Good. Honestly though, I didn't expect you to lose your temper like that. I know **_**Capitano**_** Visconti's command style drives you up the wall and I know she was in the wrong this time, but leave the disciplining to her actual CO, understood?"**

"Yes, ma'am."

"**Very well, carry on."**

The radio clicked off with a definite finality. Marian sighed and closed her eyes. It was a technique she'd learned from Captain Takei when they were working together in Fuso.

'_Breathe in, breathe out. Inhale, exhale. Be like water, calm and fluid. Let all worries flow from you like a river, '_

Captain Takei had called it Zen.

When Marian next opened her eyes, there was no anger, none of the fury that had taken her earlier. Only serenity, calm, and focus. She reached up and switched her radio's frequency to match that of A-Unit's. "I am ready, Commander de Grunne."

Now that they have all synched their frequencies, they could now strategize. "**Alright, now that I have your attention, is there anything about the Neuroi that you could care to add? Any piece of information, no matter how insignificant, could be vital,"** Rosalie said.

All of the witches present looked at one another, save for Adriana and Marian who were pointedly ignoring one another. The new Neuroi were just too fast for almost any of them to make a detailed observation. Almost.

"_Hai._ Here's what I've seen of the Neuroi." Kunika proceeded to report every detail of the new Neuroi's design.

"**Hm, so they're optimized for attack while neglecting defense, eh?"** Rosalie noted.

"**Looks like it,"** Heinrike agreed.

Adriana also reported her observations, especially about the new Neuroi's surprising maneuverability.

"_**Scheisse.**_** I was hoping its high speed would mean it wouldn't be able to turn quickly."** Heinrike cursed.

"**We can't have everything go right, Ms. Heinrike. It would just make us dull in the end."** Rosalie consoled.

"**Well, looks like we've got all our pieces in place. Shall we go with Plan C, then?"** Geena asked.

"**Wait, what's the Neuroi's current speed now?"**

The witches could hear mumbling as the radar operator answered his

commander's query.

"**About Mach .93, eh? And since they seem to be maintaining that speed for most of the engagement, it's likely their top speed tooâ€|yes, I think Plan C would be best, Geena."**

Marian chose this moment to pipe up. "So, you guys are going to clue us in on this Plan C of yours or are you just going to keep making cryptic statements?"

"**Ah, my apologies about that. Very well, here's what Geena, Ms. Heinrike, and I have brainstormed up."**

After explaining the specifics of the mysterious Plan C, Marian nodded. "It's a good plan. It'll neutralize their speed advantage if we do this right."

"Not to mention we outnumber this guy 6 to 1," Adriana said, glancing at Marian for her reaction. When she saw only calm acknowledgment of her input, she relaxed. Slightly.

"**Um, bad new on that. Radar just picked the other 2 high-speed Neuroi breaking formation with the other Neuroi and heading towards the lone Neuroi. It looks like they're going to link up with it before attacking you again,"** Rosalie informed grimly.

"Okay, so now it's 2 to 1. It's still in our favor."

"Insomuch as facing alien craft from another world still counts as being in our favor." Though she was still calm, sarcasm came to Marian as naturally as breathing. Not even Zen meditation could change one's innate personality.

The remark earned a glare from Adriana, but her anger subsided when she saw only wry humor in Marian's eyes, not the mocking she'd been expecting.

"But you're right, it is still technically in our favor in terms of numbers. If we exploit that, then-"

"We can still beat them," Adriana finished. She then clapped her hands together. "Alright, streghe. Get into formation. Let's show these Neuroi what happens when you play with witches!"

The other witches cheered/shouted/spoke their agreement.

Then Adrian raised a hand to interrupt. "But first, are you two going to get new weapons," she pointed at Marian and Jennifer. "Or do you still think you can use those pieces of scrap metal?"

They both started and looked down at their weapons. It was only now that Adriana had pointed it out that they realized their weapons they'd been holding had blackened and burst chambers from their ammo cooking off. In the case of Jennifer's M3 autocannon, part of the receiver had actually cracked, rendering the weapon completely unsalvageable. Now it was only useful for scrap.

Silence reigned. Dead silence. You could hear the wind blow by as the silence dragged on-

"You've got to be kidding me!" Jennifer cried as she threw her M3 away in frustration. The massive weapon sailed into the distance, down into the forest far below, likely never to be recovered again. Likewise, she threw away her spare 60-round drums for the M3, since right now they were nothing but dead weight.

Marian simply dropped her now useless M1919A6 and pulled her backup weapon, a M3 Grease Gun, from where it was slung over her back. "You might want to check your backup, Jen. Just in case," she said as she pulled back the bolt on her M3, checking for any damage.

Jennifer quickly pulled out her own backup weapon, a M1A1 Thompson submachine gun, and checked it for any damage. "I'm clear!" she shouted after few seconds.

"So am I," Marian answered as she switched the safety off. She looked around at the other witches staring at her and Jennifer. "What are you maggots think you're doing? Get into formation already!"

After a few stammered replies, the witches finally got into formation for Plan C. The formation consisted of two lines: the blocking line and the flanking line. The blocking line—composed of Jennifer, Kunika, and Carla—were to basically take the incoming fire from the Neuroi and keep them focused on the witches by any means necessary. The flanking line—composed of Marian, Isaac, and Adriana—were to fly out from behind the blocking line once the Neuroi were engaged with it and attack the Neuroi from their flanks. Any attempt by the Neuroi to break off their attack runs or even switch targets would expose them to fire from the witches. It wasn't perfect, given that they had but a few seconds in which to engage the Neuroi, but it was the best they could come up with on the spot.

The Neuroi appeared in the distance as 3 black dots. They approached in wedge formation, screeching their fury at the puny meatsacks who destroyed one of their brethren. If the witches had been ordinary meatsacks, they would have fallen to the powerful lasers already.

Fortunately, these meatsacks were a lot tougher than your average meatsack.

As soon as the Neuroi opened up with laser fire, the blocking line immediately went and did what they were called to do: block. At the same time, the flanking line zoomed out from behind the blocking witches and opened fire on the Neuroi.

Marian activated her magic ability, Speed Boost. Her ability allowed her to sync with her familiar, the American Quarter Horse, and increase her speed and acceleration in short sprints. The engines of her North Liberion XP-51G Mustang striker roared as magic flooded it and she dashed out into the Neuroi's flank, firing her M3 Grease Gun full-auto into the side of the Neuroi. The Neuroi roared in twinned fury and agony as .45 ACP bullets raked across its somewhat fragile body and it turned to engage the witch attacking it, firing lasers that smashed into Marian's shield like hammers of light. In doing so though, it completely forgot about the witch in front of it.

Jennifer rushed out and opened up with her M1A1 Thompson. The weapon known infamously as the "Chicago Piano"—among other names—spat

out .45 ACP bullets at a rate of 600-700 rpm, sending a storm of jacketed lead into the distracted Neuroi. The Neuroi once more knew pain as the bullets tore into its flank, then a large chunk fell off to reveal a glowing, red dodecahedron: the Neuroi's core. The Neuroi immediately rolled and turned to hide its exposed core and give itself time to regenerate while simultaneously engaging its attacker. Marian, however, used her Speed Boost to quickly gain a firing angle on the Neuroi's ravaged flank. She fired a long burst from her M3 Grease Gun into the Neuroi's side, emptying the magazine with a click. 16 rounds struck the Neuroi. 5 of those struck the core. With bullet holes torn into it, the core's glow died and it shattered like glass, taking the rest of the Neuroi with it.

As laser fire slammed into blue magic circle covered with Fusoan seal script and Sanskrit that was Kunika's magic shield, Isaac quickly dashed out from behind her friend. Since the Neuroi was busy attacking Kunika, Isaac decided not to do her magically-enhanced trick shooting from before and instead fired at its flank directly. Round after round slammed into the Neuroi, each exploding inside the alien craft's body and blowing out large chunks from it, prompting the Neuroi in question to turn its attention to the red-headed witch, firing its lasers at her. Unfortunately, in its zeal to attack its attacker, it failed to notice 2 things:

1. Its core was exposed.
2. There was another witch in front of it.

Kunika took advantage of the Neuroi momentary lapse in attention and blazed away at the core with her Type 99, sending small chunks of Neuroi flying away. The Neuroi realized its mistake and it quickly rolled to cover its wounded side, but for a moment, its exposed core was facing Isaac. Always the watchful hunter, Isaac took full advantage and fired one round into the core. That single 20mm HEI shell shattered the core into a pieces. After which, the Neuroi exploded into a shower of white shards like its brethren.

The last Neuroi was in the process of firing its lasers at Carla when Adriana dashed out from behind the blonde witch and aimed her Fliegerhammer at the Neuroi. Just as she was pulling the trigger however, the Neuroi suddenly turned and fired at Adriana, forcing her to either throw up her shield or be turned into barbecued Adriana, also consequently throwing her aim off and the rocket she subsequently launched missed the Neuroi by exactly 51.6 meters. The Neuroi had seen through the eyes of its brethren before it was destroyed that the red-haired human was incredibly dangerous due to her weapon and ability, and so had gone for her first, designating her the priority target in favor of the yellow-haired human; a mistake the Neuroi immediately regretted.

While Adriana's Fliegerhammer did technically possess more firepower than Carla's weapon, that didn't mean Carla was armed with a peashooter, as the stream of .50 caliber API-T rounds attested to that fact. Carla's weapon was one of the original Browning M2 heavy machine guns fitted with a water-cooling jacket over the barrel. This particular model though, had its water-cooling jacket modified to be filled with compressed ether instead, allowing it to take full advantage of Carla's Ether Cooling ability. With this ether-cooling jacket, Carla can fire her Browning M2 for very long periods without ever worrying about overheating; a great boon for any machine gun and

a bane to any enemy in front of said machine gun, as the Neuroi could attest.

Carla's use of tracer rounds allowed her to "walk" her right into the Neuroi. The red-tipped M20 Armor-Piercing-Incendiary-Tracer rounds smashed apart the Neuroi body while cauterizing the wounds at the same time: something the Neuroi really, really did not like as evidenced by screech of pain and fury (more the former) emitted by the Neuroi. Still, it pressed its attack on Adriana, hoping to take at least one of its kind's most hated and feared enemy down with it. Adriana though, had other plans.

Instead of taking the blows from the Neuroi's lasers this time, Adriana brought down her shield and slipped between the Neuroi's lasers instead while taking aim with her Fliegerhammer. One of the crimson beams came so close that the cloth along her left arm was scorched and blackened while the skin beneath it blistered from the heat. Only Adriana's adrenaline high kept her from feeling it as she pulled the trigger. "Morisci!" she screamed in Romagnan as nine 20mm HE rockets flew out from her Fliegerhammer. The Neuroi was shocked at the apparent insanity of the maneuver the human took, or it would have been had it lived long enough to feel shocked. Travelling at 350 m/s, the nine rockets took a fraction of a second to reach their target. All were direct hits. The Neuroi literally vanished in the ensuing explosions. By the time the explosions dissipated, only a few stray fragments of Neuroi were left to fall down to the earth below.

Had an AI been recording the engagement, it would have shown that the entire engagement lasted only 5.06 seconds. A coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not.

Afterwards, the witches abandoned all discipline as they wildly cheered and congratulated each other for their kills. That is, after they'd caught their breath.

Marian flew up next to Adrian. Her sharp eyes noted the burns across her left arm.

"What?" Adriana said defensively.

"That was quite a trick you pulled off back there," Marian finally said.

Adrian's right eyebrow quirked up in anticipation.

"So great that I'd recommend you change out your uniform for a white straitjacket, ASAP."

Now Adriana's eyebrows crossed in irritation.

"Of course," Marian chuckled, "We might need more people like you to stand a chance against these Neuroi."

Adriana's eyebrows returned to a level position as she accepted the backhanded compliment. "Grazie, I think."

Meanwhile, Kunika was watching with joy that their two units' commanders have made up, in a way.

Then the ear radios on all the witches present crackled to life.
"This is Commander de Grunne, radar has an update on the three remaining Neuroi."

Marian stiffened as she remembered. _'Shit, I forgot about them!'_
"Commander de Grunne, what's the ETA on those Neuroi until they reach our forward base?!" she asked frantically.

"**That's just it. It's zero."**

Marian's eyes widened in shock and grief, as did the eyes of every other witch around her.. _'No, we failedâ€¦!'_

Just then, another voice came in. **"Rosalie, I think you're giving them the wrong idea. To clarify, the Neuroi have not reached the base. They've pulled a 180 and are now heading back across the Rhine at full speed,"** Geena reported.

Relief that the base hadn't been destroyed was quickly replaced by confusion at the Neurois' actions.

'_They _retreated_? They've never retreated. Never. They've always fought to the last before. Just what's going on?_'_ went through the minds of all the witches present.

"**In any case,"** the voice of Wing Commander Grunne came over the radio, interrupting the witches' thoughts. **"All witches are to RTB to Sedan Base at this time. And by all witches, I mean **_**all**_** witches, B-Unit included. We need to have a discussion as to the events of today. Wing Commander Preddy will be joining you shortly. Over and out." **

The radio clicked off with a finality that made all the witches gulp. Wing Commander de Grunne did not sound like a happy woman.

* * *

><p>506**th**** JFW A-Unit Base, Sedan,
Gallia**

First Lieutenant Kunika Kuroda

1145 hours

Kunika fidgeted nervously as the witches sat in a sofa in the base's lounge room. Waka was sitting in her lap and she tried to calm herself down by petting him. It wasn't working. She wasn't the only nervous one.

On Kunika's left was Jennifer, who was also fidgeting nervously. Her friend's nervousness had infected her and she was now wondering what Wing Commander de Grunne was going to do. Combined with the fact that she had not slept much since last night's patrol only increased her stress level.

On Kunika's right was Isaac with a disassembled Solothurn S-18/1000 on the table in front of her. The red-headed witch was busy cleaning the bolt. Though she looked calm, anyone who'd been paying attention to her who know that she'd been meticulously cleaning the bolt for the last 15 minutes, which showed just how nervous she was.

On the sofa to their left sat Carla, Marian, and Adriana. At one end, Carla held a bottle of Coke in her hands and took a sip from it every now and then. The glass bottle was still dripping with condensation from her using her Ether Cooling ability to keep the carbonated beverage nice and chilly. Apparently, the drink was doing wonders for her nerves as she showed no sign of nervousness.

At the other end, Adriana was resting her cheek on her left hand while the elbow of said arm was propped up on the sofa's arm. The sleeve of her uniform was still scorched (she hadn't bothered to change), but the burns running down her arm have been healed thanks to Jennifer. Her eyes were closed and she looked like she was completely at peace. Only the regular tapping of the fingers of her other hand betrayed her agitation. Had her familiar been out, her tail would have been lashing as well.

Sandwiched in between was Marian, who appeared to be busy reading a book, specifically a technical manual entitled Turbojet Engines: The Theory and Application in the Development of Jet Strikers by Ursula Hartmann (translated from the original Karlslandan by Francine Whittle). However, the fact that she kept looking up from her book at one of the witches sitting on the sofa next to her own broke the illusion.

On that sofa sat two blonde witches. Sitting on the right-hand side of the sofa was Heinrike. Since she'd started sitting there, she'd been sitting at ramrod attention as befitting a soldier of Karlsland. However, as the time dragged on, even her iron-stiff discipline started to waver as she slowly leaned back against the sofa.

Sitting next to Heinrike in the center was Rosalie, who was calmly sitting there. Every so often, she would pick up a porcelain cup full of steaming, hot tea (Earl Grey with one cream and no sugar, if you wanted to know) and sip from it. She was waiting for one more member of their JFW before beginning.

As if on cue, the door leading to the hangar clicked. Every witch in the lounge room immediately stopped what they were doing and sat at attention as the door opened to reveal a brown-haired young woman dressed in the brown uniform of the Liberion Army Air Force. The only witch who didn't turn into a statue was Rosalie.

"Ah, Geena. Thank you for coming all this way. Ah, and will you be having the usual?" Rosalie asked.

Wing Commander Geena Preddey nodded and smiled. "It's no problem, Rosalie. And yes, that would be well appreciated. Thank you," the Liberion witch answered in a quiet Britannian accent.

As Geena sat down on the empty seat next to Rosalie, the latter took a teapot filled with Britannish breakfast tea and poured it into an empty porcelain cup on a saucer of the same make she had. She then added one cream and two lumps of sugar to it before handing it to Geena. The Liberion witch inhaled the fragrance of the tea and sighed happily before taking a sip. "Mm, delicious. You make an excellent brew as always, my dear," Geena said.

Rosalie waved a hand in disagreement. "Oh, please. You know I wasn't that good when I first started. I could barely boil a pot of water

without burning it, remember?"

"True. But this is definitely a case of practice makes perfect. And this, is as close to perfection as you can possibly get."

The two witches went on, back and forth to one another in front of their near-stupefied subordinates, who had no idea what to make of their respective commanders' apparent familiarity with each other.

After a minute, Rosalie cleared her throat. "Well, then. Enough with the pleasantries, shall we? First off, I would like to begin with the issue of our two units' coordination with each other."

"If you can call it that," Marian muttered, earning her glares from Adriana and Heinrike.

As their mouths opened, Rosalie raised a hand to forestall them. "No, she's right. Because of our units' lack of communication with each other, this whole situation very nearly turned into a disaster. Only luck and your individual skills kept it from becoming so. That being said," she looked down in shame and then stared levelly at them. "I would like to formally apologize to all of you. If I'd been a better commander, I would never have allowed this awful situation of splitting our wing to come to pass. You have my sincerest apologies for this mess."

None of the witches knew how to react to this, nor were they prepared when Geena put down her tea, reached over with her right hand, and bonked Rosalie lightly on the head with a knifehand strike. As Rosalie rubbed the top of the head, Geena spoke, "I thought I'd gotten you to understand the fault isn't entirely yours. I swear, your noble head can be so thick at times."

As Rosalie stared at her while still rubbing the spot on her head where she'd been bonked, Geena continued. "Look, we both share some blame for caving in to those aristocrats' demands, but I'm fairly certain the real fault lies with them. That whole 'nobles and commoners shouldn't be allowed to mingle' business is just pure bullshit." The last word was spoken with a vehemence the Liberion witches had rarely heard from their soft-spoken commander. "That means you shouldn't try to place all the blame on yourself. Share some of the blame with me for once. You understand me?"

Rosalie looked sheepish as she nodded slowly. "Iâ€|understand. Thank you, Geena. For everything."

Geena flashed her one of her rare smiles. "No problem, love. So you do have a solution for this whole split wing syndrome of ours, do you?"

By now, the other witches had gotten used to their commanders' apparent familiarity with each other and it was more reassuring than surprising. Rosalie looked back at the other witches. "Yes, I do. Now, here's what I have in mind. It's really quite simple,"

Rosalie proceeded to describe how she would solve their units' lack of communication with each other, and it was a very simple solution indeed. Kunika's eyes went wide as her commander finished outlining her solution. "So we'll be combined into one unit?" Kunika asked with

a mixture of hope and glee.

Marian rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes as she thought. "It would definitely solve all our problems," she opened her eyes and looked squarely at Rosalie. "But do you think those stuck-up nobles will ever agree to this? They did put us in this mess in the first place."

Rosalie closed her eyes as she thought. "It's not all that likely." She opened them again as she came to a decision. "I'll probably have to use my family's connections to force them. And even then" she shook her head. "We'll wait and see. If this doesn't work-

"If it doesn't work, there's always Plan B," Geena finished.

"Plan B?" the other witches echoed.

Geena scratched her chin. "It's"

"A work in production." Rosalie finished.

The groans of disbelief that followed was quite audible. Even the mechanics working in the hangar almost heard it.

Rosalie clapped her hands together. "Now then, we'll just have to wait and see how the meeting goes. In the meantime-

The ear radio in Rosalie's right ear clicked on. "**Wing Commander de Grunne, I have news for you," **the base's radar operator reported.

Wing Commander de Grunne reached up and pressed her throatmike. "I copy, what's happening?"

"**It's begun. They're starting Operation Trajanus. I'd thought you and the other girls would like to listen in.**" The radar operator's normally taciturn voice was filled with excitement.

Rosalie grinned. "I copy. We'll be in ops shortly, over." As she shut off her throatmike, she looked at the quizzical expressions of the witches assembled. "They're starting Operation Trajanus. Everyone to the ops center."

Their eyes widened at the news. Operation Trajanus had been planned for months now after Sergeant Miyafuji's partial success in establishing peaceful contact with a Neuroi hive. If this succeeds, they'll not only regain Venezia, but they'll also possibly be able to begin negotiations with the Neuroi and end the war. If not, then they'll at least start a schism within the Neuroi's ranks and divide them so that they'll be easier to defeat.

None of the witches wasted any time hightailing it to the base's ops center.

As they gathered around the radio in the ops center, they waited in anticipation for the first report from the contacting unit.

Finally, it came.

"**We have visual confirmation on the Neuroi! It looks just like the

humanoid form reported by the 501****st**** last year."**

"**Confirmed here as well. Now commencing contact procedures,**" the voice of Captain Junko Takei filtered through over the radio.

'_Captain Takei!_' Marian thought happily as she heard her old friend's voice.

"**Understood.**"

A long moment of silence passed by.

"**This is Captain Takei. The humanoid Neuroi is now 2 meters in front of me. I will now attempt basic communications with it.**" A short pause. **"We come in peace. Do you understand me?"**

Another short pause.

"**It nodded! It understood-wait.**" There was yet another short pause. **"It'sâ€¦examining me, I suppose? It's flying around me slowly and-wait, now it's directly in front of me and-**_**ara**_**? It's holding out its hand.**"

Everyone in the room listened to the radio with bated breath, save for Waka who couldn't care less about the strange voices coming out of the equally strange box and was more concerned with snuggling up to his owner.

"**Itsâ€¦skin feels metallic, but warm. Almost like metal made flesh.**" Captain Takei's voice sounded almost giddy with excitement despite the seriousness of the situation. **"I think this could wo-"**

Then, **"Oof! What the-"**

Then suddenly, the witches of the 506th heard two familiar sounds that chilled them to the bone. One was the high-pitched whine of Neuroi laser fire. The other was the scream of a Neuroi in agony, dying down to grim silence.

"**Wh-Why did a Neuroi beam hit that Neuro-" **Then they heard a gasp from Takei. **"_**Naniâ€¦are?*_**"

Soon after, the sound of Neuroi last fire filled the room followed quickly by yells and screams from both mundane pilots and witches.

Marian grabbed the transmitter. "This is Captain Carl! Takei-_taii_, what's happening?!"

"**This is Takeiâ€¦the mission has failedâ€¦|"** The furious sounds of battle could be heard amidst Captain Takei's voice. **"I repeatâ€¦Operation Trajanus has failedâ€¦|"**

There was the sound of laser fire and the signal dissolved into static.

"Takei-_taii!_ Takei-_taii!_ Junko, _kikoeru ka?!_" Marian screamed

into the radio as she frantically spun the dials, trying the reacquire the signal. The other witches had to restrain her as she screamed and cried out Captain Takei's name.

* * *

><p>An hour later, the witches of the 506th finally learned what happened. A giant Neuroi hive came and destroyed the hive they were attempting to communicate with. Soon after, it attacked the Allied forces. Most of the mundane aircraft were shot down and their pilots killed. Several of the witches of the 504th Joint Fighter Wing were critically injured in the fighting. Captain Takei was among the worst injured. For all intents and purposes, the 504th JFW was no longer combat-capable. The war had now taken a new and ominous turn.<p>

* * *

><p>A digital cookie to anyone who can correctly guess which post-war aircraft I based my high-speed Neuroi on.

.

3. Chapter 1

****Disclaimer:** For repetition's sakes, I do not own either Halo or Strike Witches. Halo is owned by Microsoft Studios and Strike Witches is owned by Shimada Fumikane.**

****A/N:** BbK2442 here with the latest chapter of Halo: Contact Neuroi (Maybe I should shorten it to HalCoN instead? What do you think?) Anyway, this is where the main story finally gets started. **

****And please leave a review. I can't improve the story unless I know what people think of it. Any and all criticism is accepted. Flames aren't.****

****I've made some slight changes to the story. Check it out.****

****Anyway, please enjoy.****

* * *

><p>Chapter 1- Down the Slipspace Rabbit-Hole, Here We Go

****Reach Orbit****

****UNSC **_**Salamander**_** Mess Hall****

****March 4, 2575****

****0612 hours****

Jakob was staring at the contents of Sar's tray with a look of morbid fascination as he chewed slowly on something the label claimed was chicken casserole, with Sar herself deciding which piece of food to eat first.

Granted, it wasn't all bad. Some of the tray's sections contained relatively normal foodstuff. For starters, UNSC military trays were divided into 6 sections: 2 large sections with 4 smaller ones on the sides. In one of the large sections on Sar's tray was a serving of Salisbury steak with gravy and in the other was a serving of mashed potatoes with butter. Even two of the smaller sections contained normal foodstuffs: mixed vegetables in one section and canned peaches in the other (she liked the taste of canned peaches more than fresh ones). Really, it was the contents of the other two sections that tended to draw stares.

The section on the upper right corner of Sar's tray (Sar's perspective) had a line of roasted grasshopper/shrimp-like creatures with too many legs on them. Several were already pulled apart and had their pale white meat inside sucked out by one Sar Fen. Granted, to Jakob, they didn't look very disgusting so long as he thought of them as alien versions of shrimp (which they did vaguely resemble). No, what really makes Jakob's stomach do acrobatics was the contents of the last section of Sar's tray.

On the bottom-left corner of Sar's tray, were fat, wriggling grub-like creatures. Each one was about 10 cm long and the width of a full-grown man's thumb. Their skin was a bright crimson hue and their heads were small with an orange and black pattern on it. As stated before, they were wriggling around, trying to escape their inevitable doom in the pit of Sar's stomach.

As Jakob watched, one of those wriggling grubs managed to wriggle itself out of its section of tray right into the gravy-filled section that held the half-eaten Salisbury steak. It began thrashing violently the moment it hit the still-hot gravy. Obviously, the high temperatures combined with the saltiness of the gravy did not agree with the creature. Unfortunately, the grub's violent movements caught the attention of the female human above it, who had now decided what bit of food she wanted. She took her plastic fork and speared the creature, yellowish fluid seeping out from where the tines had impaled it. The grub thrashed violently from the injuries, trying to escape its looming fate, but to no avail. Sar brought the wriggling creature up with her fork and popped it into her mouth, chewing with obvious relish and delight as the grub finally met its doom.

Sar noticed the stares of Jakob as she finished chewing and swallowed. "What?" she asked innocently.

Jakob opened his mouth, couldn't think of anything to say without offending her, and then promptly closed it.

Tak then proceeded to say something to Sar, who then proceeded to look at Jakob with a tilted head. "You think this weird?" Sar asked while pointing at the wriggling grubs.

Jakob looked quite uncomfortable as he answered, "Well, you have to admit, it's kind of weird for a human to eat live, wriggling grubs and like it."

"But I always eat Darrak worms when I live in mama's ship," Sar countered.

"No disrespect, but there's humans and there's Kig-Yar. Your family are Kig-Yar-"

"And a Mgalekgolo," Sar interrupted.

"Oh, right. The point is, they're not human, and you are. And for a human to eat that is weird."

Sar thought about it. It took all of three seconds for her to decide on her answer.

"Don't care," she answered as she popped another one of the crimson grubs into her mouth.

Jakob sighed in utter defeat. Tak and Anna shrugged in sympathy while Taiga just presented a lop-sided smile.

"You know how Sar-chan is. When she's set her mind to something, she's not going to give up. Ever," she said.

Jakob sighed again, this time more deeply, and proceeded to stare at the ceiling, hoping everyone will forget the awkward moment. He found his gaze wandering to one of the tables and seats attached to the ceiling where the Yanme'e crew were. The Minors were eating and drinking silently, while the Majors and Ultras were doing that and chattering in their weird language that no human could possibly reproduce, no matter what parts of their bodies they used. The fact that they regularly used pheromones and ultrasonic clicks in their "speech" didn't make it any easier to understand. As he watched a metallic green-shelled Yanme'e pick up a morsel of food that resembled a green vegetable of some sort and chewed on it, a question occurred to him.

"You think Yanme'e have a sense of taste?" Jakob asked.

The others looked up at what Jakob was staring at.

"Don't they have those grabby mouth claws?" Taiga asked.

"Mandibles," Tak said, via Sar's translation.

Taiga shot him a glare. "What are you, my English teacher?"

"I might as well be," Sar translated.

"Anyway, I'm pretty sure mandibles don't have taste buds," Jakob answered quickly before any arguments could start.

"Maybe they have taste buds on their feet like flies? Or maybe they're on the antennae?" Anna wondered.

"I don't know about the antennae, considering it's not going anywhere near the food, but you might be onto something with the feet angle. Maybe that guy does have taste buds on his feet. I'm going to have to find time to ask of those guys someday," Jakob answered.

Tak squawked something.

"Her. Tak say all Yanme'e here are hers," Sar translated.

"Oh yeah. The Yanme'e are like bees, aren't they? The workers are all

sterile femalesâ€¦" Jakob trailed off.

"Wouldn't that make them genderless then?" Taiga asked.

"Nah. They still got girl parts. It's just that they don't work," Anna answered.

Taiga scratched her chin as she thought. "But isn't that the same as having no girl parts to begin with?"

Tak answered with a long series of squawks, barks, and jabbering.

Sar scratched the back of her head as she tried to translate. "Tak say they not have parts, but still girl becauseâ€¦gah!" Sar cut off her translation to hiss and growl at Tak, who squawked in confusion and hissed back as Sar continued her rant in Kig-Yar.

Having spent a lot of time with them, Jakob knew what was bugging her. "Calm down, Sar," he said as he held both arms in a placating manner. "Tak knows your English skills aren't exactly first-rate. I'm sure he didn't mean to use long words you can't translate well."

Tak nodded once. Just one nod was what it took for her to calm down.

Jakob sighed again. Trying to be his team's arbiter was tiring, to say the least.

"Look, when I have time, I'll look for Dizzy. I'm sure by now, he'll haveâ€¦" Jakob's voice trailed off as he noticed a purple and electric-blue creature float into the mess hall. Its long, serpentine head waved back and forth as it looked for someone. Jakob immediately stood up and waved.

"Hey, Diz! Over here!" he shouted.

The Huragok chirped in surprise and floated over to where Jakob and the rest of Vanguard Team (plus Anna) were. The Huragok were among the strangest of the aliens the Salamander carried as crew. This one, like its brethren, was no exception. Its main body looked like a large cluster of indigo balloons stuck together. Four long, electric-blue tentacles trailed down from below the main body while a pair of slightly shorter, crimson feelers rose up from near the top-front of the body. A long, serpentine head the same electric-blue as its tentacles and dotted with 6 small, black eyes extended from the front of the body while a shorter tail-like section extended from the rear.

The Huragok named Spins-in-Place, also known as Dizzy, whistled pleasantly to the people at the table, then turned to Jakob and made a series of signs with its four tentacles.

Jakob laughed. "Nice to see you too, Diz." He then noticed that one of Dizzy's tentacles was curled around a small object. Jakob pointed at it and said, "Let me guess, you're here to return that to Tak?"

Diz whistled and bobbed its head up and down in a nod. It then extended the tentacle holding the object to Tak and uncurled it to

reveal Tak's translator device looking like it just came out of the factory. It had a small screen with an equally as small keyboard beneath it.

Tak grinned and took the small device in a 3-fingered grasp. He then placed it into a holder at the base of his neck. The small indicator light on it blinked on. Tak then coughed and said, "Testing, testing. I'm not saying anything strange now, am I?" His voice still sounded like his usual voice—"deep and raspy"—but it was now in English instead of Kig-Yar.

Everyone flashed him a thumbs-up.

"Nope. It's 100% a-okay, now," Jakob reported.

Tak's grin got wider, displaying the dagger-like fangs behind his curved beak. "Excellent! I'm quite glad now that I don't have to rely on an intermediary to translate for me." One of his yellow, slit-pupil eyes travelled to the side to answer Sar's glare. "Not that your translation hasn't been helpful, Sar, but your English skills are, ah—" Tak scratched his chin lightly with a middle claw. "Somewhat lacking in finesse," he concluded.

Sar merely folded her arms in frustration.

"Not my fault English so hard," she muttered darkly.

Meanwhile, Taiga stared at Dizzy bobbing over the table.

"Hey, your name is Dizzy, right?" she asked the Huragok in question.

Dizzy turned to her. It nodded and whistled a confirmation.

"So why do they call you that?"

Dizzy whistled thoughtfully, then turned to Jakob and made some more signs at him.

Jakob scratched the back of his head. "Well, it's kind of a funny story really. You know how Huragok name each other by what they do when they're first made? Well, when they first made Dizzy, he started spinning around for some reason and couldn't stop. He got so dizzy, the other Huragok had to hold him in place so that he could get his bearings long enough to adjust his gas level. That's why the others named him Spins-in-Place and that's why—"

"Well, what do you know? It's the chicken team," a voice taunted.

Everyone turned to look at the source of the voice, which came from a man in his mid-20s with no insignia on his dull green uniform, indicating the rank of a Private.

"What do you want, Tony?" Jakob said with an exasperated tone.

Antonio Fernandez, known by his nickname of Tony, gave him a frown that looked as if he'd been born with it. "Buzz off, Doc. My business is with the chicken girl and her pet."

Sar growled softly and started to rise, until Jakob and Tak both gave her a look that said, "Stand down," which made her sit back down. Still, she glared at Tony like she wanted to rip his throat out with her bare teeth.

Jakob turned back and stared down at Tony. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a group of Ruuhtan Kig-Yar nearby who'd heard Tony's remark and were hissing softly.

True, Sar was a human, but the other Kig-Yar, some of which were distantly related to Sar's mom, accepted Sar as one of their own. A phrase came to Jakob's mind as he saw them glare at Tony with bared fangs: Slight one Kig-Yar, and you slight them all.

He then noticed out of the corner of his other eye a group of marines who apparently share Tony's views, for they had clenched fists and were muttering to themselves while staring at the scene before them. Jakob knew he had to diffuse this quickly. If a brawl starts between the humans and the Kig-Yar, it would get ugly. Dagger-like fangs and razor-sharp claws and talons can do a lot of damage to unprotected human flesh, after all, and though the Kig-Yar were among the smaller of the ex-Covenant races, they were pretty big compared to humans, with each Kig-Yar averaging between 1.9 to 2 meters tall and weighing on average 90 kg, and that's just for the normal subspecies. A human equipped with nothing more than barely sharp teeth and bare hands with soft, flabby fingers stood at a distinct disadvantage.

Jakob really, really did not want this to turn into an interspecies free-for-all. While he didn't particularly like Tony (he'd heard some nasty rumors about him), he also didn't want to see him get mauled by a group of Kig-Yar due to Tony's own stupidity. Jakob also didn't want to see the Kig-Yar get court-martialed because of said stupidity either. He had to defuse this situation now.

"Is there a point to this, Tony?" Jakob asked levelly, trying to restrain his anger at Tony harassing one of his friends.

"My point? My point," he spat, "Is this: why the fuck are you letting something whose race murdered billions sitting at your table?!"

The area around them went silent from the outburst. Dizzy, frightened by the hostility and loud noise, did what most Huragok did when confronted with danger: it curled up and floated away. The metallic green Yanme'e, who'd been watching the scene below her, was startled by the rapid ascent of the Huragok. In a rare moment of cooperation between the two species, the Yanme'e reached out and grabbed Dizzy before it smacked into the ceiling and placed it underneath her table, leaving the Huragok to bob against the table like a loose balloon.

Throughout all this, Jakob just stared levelly at Tony. "First, let me correct you on something." He turned to Tak. "Tak, remind me, how old are you again?"

"I am almost 39 tarsiks old. That meansâ€¦" Tak scratched the bottom of his jaw as he thought. "I am about 21 of your years old." He grinned. "Chu'ot orbits Y'Deio much faster than Earth does around Sol, you know."

Jakob nodded and turned back to Tony. "There, you see? Tak wasn't even born yet when the Great War ended. There's no way he could've killed anyone then. And also," his eyes narrowed in anger. "Tak is a free man"so to speakand he can sit anywhere he wants. Not to mention, I say he can sit here, _Private_. So take. A. Hike." Jakob emphasized each word as he spoke.

Tony merely growled back at him. "You" His fists clenched. "Don't you fucking dare dismiss me like that!" One arm reeled back for a punch.

"I wouldn't do that if were you, punk." Tony stopped his swing in mid-air as he stared in surprise at Anna's words. She hadn't even been looking at him when she'd said it. Now she was just looking at him from the side, as if dismissing him as an annoying little bug. "Striking a superior officer? I'm pretty that's a couple a' weeks in the brig. Add to that drunk while on duty, and it just might mean a court-martial for ya. Ya really want that?"

Jakob was a bit surprised at Anna's declaration. Tony didn't look drunk, he looked perfectly sober in fact. He sniffed the air in response, and he realized that indeed, Tony was blowing alcohol vapors with each word he spoke. He wondered where Tony got the booze from, then remembered Stephanidis and his DIY distillery. The moonshine the little Greek turned out could pull double duty as drain cleaner.

Tony whirled in response to Anna's words. "Y-You stay of this! It's got nothing to do with you, you dyke!"

Instead of being offended like what Tony intended with his insult, Anna merely gave him a bewildered look. "What does _that_ mean?" she asked with confusion.

Jakob mentally facepalmed. _'What backwater colony did he learn that from?_' he wondered at Tony's use of a really, really old word that no one used anymore [1].

In fact, the only reason Earth-born Jakob knew what the word "dyke" meant was because he had been looking for the definition to the word "dike" and had happened to come across a list of synonyms.

'_That word must be common where he came from, but there's no way New York City-born Anna would know what that word means. Except that's not the problem,'_ Jakob thought worriedly. _'No doubt Tony's going to figure out that he's not making sense and use something from this century, and that's the real problem. Anna would just laugh off any insult like that, but she's eventually going to figure out that by insulting her sexuality, Tony is also, by extension, insulting the bond she has with her wife, and that's going to be ugly, to say the least.' _

Jakob recalled one time when he'd seen Anna hug a holo-still of her, her wife, and their daughter as if it were a stuffed animal and mentally grimaced.

'_Yeah, ugly wouldn't even begin to describe it. I think she'd do even more damage to Tony than the Kig-Yar. Now I have to try to defuse her too. Merciful Allah!_'_

As Jakob frantically tried to think of a solution, he noticed a heavy thumping sound and looked up as a pair of shadows fell over Tony. The other members of Team Vanguard plus Anna also found themselves looking up at the newcomers.

Tony, meanwhile, seemed to be too preoccupied with confusion at Anna's own confusion to notice the shadows. Indeed, he seemed to have forgotten his own anger. "What the hell? You don't know what a 'dyke' is? It's-"

"Excuse us, is there a problem?" one of the figures behind Tony asked in a voice so deep it vibrated the very air.

Tony spun around, angry at the interruption. "Who asked y-" The words died in his throat as he found himself staring not at a face but at a green, armored "crotch" plate.

His gaze travelled up, and up, until he was staring at the dull green faceplate of a Mgalekgolo in UNSCMC service, unmarked save for a few dull power indicator lights near the bottom of the helmet. The alien(s)'s "head" stood at over twice Tony's own height of 6' 2", making the massive Mgalekgolo an intimidating sight by its sheer presence alone. The presence of the other Mgalekgolo next to it turned it into overkill.

"We asked, and we shall repeat. Is there a problem?" the Mgalekgolo rumbled insistently, using the first form of "we" [2]; its voice more felt than heard.

Tony started to open his mouth as if to argue with the Mgalekgolo, then closed it back into a frown. Though he was drunk, he apparently was not dumb enough to pick a fistfight with a Mgalekgolo, a being so powerful they were given the designation "Hunter" by the UNSC, among other names (some of the most common being "Juggernaut", "Big Scary Monster", and "Why The Fuck Won't This Thing Die?!").

"No." He got off the path of the massive alien(s)' gaze(s) and walked sullenly towards the door, but not before giving Jakob and his team one last hateful glare before the door slammed shut.

Jakob didn't care. He was just happy that the whole situation resolved itself like that. "Hey thanks, man," he said to the Mgalekgolo.

There was a pause.

A long pause.

"For what do we owe your thanks to?" it asked finally.

"Neither of us did anything of note," the other one added.

Jakob blinked in confusion. "Weren't you threatening Tony for being out of line?"

The two Mgalekgolo stood in silence for a moment.

"We were merely wondering if anything was wrong due to the loud noises," the first Mgalekgolo explained.

"Do you humans not make loud noises when ****you**** are distressed?" the other one asked.

Jakob scratched his cheek. "Well, yeah, I guess. Butâ€|ah, never mind. You guys did good anyways." Jakob holds out his hand. "The name's Jakob E. Branley. Don't use it up."

Another pause. "Do not use what up?" the Mgalekgolo asked simultaneously.

Jakob mentally facepalmed. "Never mind, so what's yours'?"

"Nogata Sara Zurru," the first Mgalekgolo replied.

"Togumi Sara Taso," the second replied.

Jakob took a moment to memorize their names. "Right, Nogata, Togumi. Why don't you two sit down here?" he patted the empty seats to his right.

Nogata and Togumi looked down at the tiny (relative to them) bench next to the table while Jakob looked at the huge (relative to the bench) Mgalekgolo and suddenly realized that he had no idea if the bench would hold up under the Mgalekgolos' weight.

Nogata turned around and gingerly sat down on the metal bench. It stopped when the bench began creaking ominously and stood back up.

"Perhaps we will simply sit on the floor. That, at least, appears to hold our weight quite well."

Both Mgalekgolo then proceeded to do just that, sitting on the floor next to Team Vanguard with their armored legs crossed in lotus position.

Jakob watched as each of the two Mgalekgolo held up a smooth, discolored sphere the size of a basketball that appeared to be made of stone in their hands, or rather, their manipulator digits on their specially modified Hellfire plasma cannons. His eyebrows rose up in surprise as the Mgalekgolos' faceplates lifted up and a mass of orange Lekgolo worms reached out from each Mgalekgolo, grabbed the stone sphere from their hands, and pulled them into their bodies before their faceplates slammed shut again. The only ones who weren't surprised were Sar and Tak who'd seen Mgalekgolo eat before.

"That'sâ€|all you eat?" Jakob asked incredulously.

"Yes," Nogata and Togumi intoned.

Jakob watched, or rather, listened as the masses of worms digested the stone spheres in their bodies. Hissing and grinding sounds could be heard from within the Mgalekgolo as they fed.

After a few seconds, Jakob decided to turn his attention back to his own delicious food when suddenlyâ€|

"Guys, where'd Dizzy go?" Taiga piped up.

They all looked around to see where the Huragok went to when Tony had started shouting, all but Jakob. Long years spent hanging out with Vergil had taught him much about the behavior patterns of Huragok, including what they do when they are threatened. Thus, unlike the others who were looking around, Jakob looked up and saw Dizzy floating against one of the Yanme'e's ceiling tables with its head, tail, and tentacles curled up like a turtle.

"Hey, Diz! It's alright! You can come down now!" Jakob shouted to the Huragok.

Dizzy uncurled itself and seeing how Tony was gone, lowered itself gradually back down to Jakob's level. It whistled questioningly at Jakob before he patted it on the head, making it purr like the galaxy's weirdest cat.

"Ah, don't worry about it all too much, Diz," Jakob consoled. "He wasn't angry at you."

Dizzy chirped happily and bobbed up and down in relief.

Jakob now, at last, turned his attention back to his food and was about to chow down when he noticed something off about the food.

In the section of tray above where the remnants of the, presumably, chicken casserole were still waiting, where the rice was, there lay a large, crimson-skinned grub wriggling furiously on the white grains to try to find an escape route. A Darrak worm.

Jakob looked up at Sar. "Sar, what is this?" he asked while pointing a finger at the still-wriggling grub.

"Darrak worm," Sar replied innocently.

A vein bulged on Jakob's temple. "Yes, I know that. What I wanted to know is why is it on my food?"

"Reward," Sar replied just as innocently as the last.

"If I may clarify," Tak piped up. "I believe Sar wanted to thank you for your vehement defense of all Kig-Yar kind and thus, wanted to give you a reward for your efforts. Namely, the Darrak worm you see before you."

Jakob looked from the bright red grub, which had stopped wriggling and was actually munching on a piece of rice, to Sar's beaming face, and back to the grub, which was still content to just sit there and nom. If he accepted Sar's gift, he would have no choice but to eat the gross-looking, insect thing on his tray. Yet, if he rejected it, he would get on Sar's bad side again, and nothing good would come of making his team's resident marksman angry. Jakob then sighed inwardly in resignation as he made his choice.

He reached forward, and grabbed the Darrak worm between forefinger and thumb. The fat, crimson grub wriggled madly in protest as it was picked up by a being hundreds of times its own body mass, but it was to no avail as Jakob lifted the grub up to his mouth.

Jakob was reminded of a scene he had seen in an old animated film

once where one of the characters had to eat a similarly large grub. He couldn't remember the contents of the film muchâ€"something about lions and monarchy and fratricideâ€"but that one scene stuck out in his mind as he popped the Darrak worm he was holding into his mouth and chewed.

He expected to gag from the taste. The last thing he expected was to find himself appreciating the taste of live Darrak worm. The insides of the creature tasted like cream cheese and butter with a hint of peanuts to him.

"Good?" Sar asked.

Jakob found himself unable to answer as he struggled to reconcile the unexpectedly delicious taste of the Darrak worm with the very unpleasant feeling of the pieces of the grub-like creature still twitching in his mouth.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** Conference Room**

0630 hours

RADM Cutter took a sip from his cup of coffee. Apparently, it was really good coffee because he took another sip before setting the thermally-insulated cup down on the holotank table and sealing the lid.

'_Adamsen really outdid himself this time,'_ Cutter thought.

Cutter then turned his attention back to the man sitting from across the table to him. He was a man in his late 20's with brown, messy hair and a pale face that looked like it rarely saw the light of day. He wore wire-rim glasses instead of the modern practice of either wearing contacts or, less often, corrective surgery. The man wore a white lab coat over a green turtleneck sweater which emphasized howâ€|nerdy he looked. The man sat there waiting for Cutter's answer to his question, which was:

"No."

The man's face fell like a stone dropped into a particularly deep body of water. "But-

"No," Cutter said firmly. "I will not order any of the men and women under my command to risk their lives test-piloting thatâ€|whatever it is you and your team are working on, Dr. Emmerich."

"Otacon," Dr. Hal "Otacon" Emmerich corrected. "I prefer to be called Otacon."

"â€|"

Dr. Emmerich pushed his glasses a little further up his face. "Regardless, I'm not asking you to order your personnel to act as my test pilot. All I'm asking is for your permission to ask one of your people to be a reserve test pilot in case our own test pilot doesn't show up, which I'm sorry to say looks more and more likely with each passing minute. I swear, I'm going toâ€|" He descended into dark

mutterings at this point, something about being drawn and quartered could just be heard. "and then, and only then, am I going to fire him." He took a deep breath and exhaled. "So, do I have your permission?"

Cutter gave it some thought before answering, "As long as your tests don't interfere with their pre-existing duties and if you can get someone to agree to test-pilot that thing of yours. Frankly, I doubt anyone's crazy enough to do it, but"

Dr. Emmerich immediately stood up and held out his hand. "You have my sincerest thanks, Admiral." Cutter automatically took the hand and shook it. "If need be, if I can't get anyone to agree to be the substitute test pilot, I'll gladly pilot the HRUNTING/YGGDRASIL Mark XII Tactical Armor Mobility System, codenamed 'Icarus', myself."

'_What's with scientists and their penchant for weird names, anyway?_' Cutter thought. '_And of all the names to pick from, why pick the name of someone who _fell_ from the sky?_'

Dr. Emmerich didn't notice his expression as he walked out of the conference room with a happy look on his face.

Cutter sat for a few moments in his chair before sighing in relief that the last of his meetings were over and getting up.

"So," Cutter wondered to himself out loud. "I wonder if there's time for breakfast now that-

"**My apologies, sir,**" Honor said as she suddenly appeared on the large holotank in the center of the room, still standing at parade rest. "**The ship is scheduled to make the jump to the Sol System in the next 15 minutes. You should hurry to the bridge soon if we wish to make the departure on time.**"

Cutter sighed as his stomach grumbled in protest. "Right, I remember. Tell de Medici to stand by, I'm on my way."

"**Ah, yes. I had forgotten something." **The AI allowed a smile to creep onto her face. "**The Lieutenant Commander had also said there is something waiting for you on the bridge's holotank. She had said you should hurry up before it gets cold,**" she said cheerfully before vanishing as suddenly as she'd appeared.

'_Before it gets cold?_' Cutter wondered as he grabbed his cup of coffee and headed to the lift. '_Could it be?_'

When he reached the door, he pressed his thumb into the pad on the console next to it. The pad automatically scanned his fingerprint and logged in his use of the life as the door opened and he stepped inside.

"Honor, get this lift moving to the bridge, on the double!"

"**Aye, sir. On the double,**" Honor said, amusement in her voice.

The lift shot up towards the _Salamander_'s bridge, which was a deck above the conference room where Cutter was. Cutter felt the gravity

briefly come and go as the lift passed between the grav-plates on each deck responsible for generating artificial gravity aboard the _Salamander_. Such a sensation had been known to induce nausea in those who weren't prepared for it. Fortunately, the sensation lasted for only a brief few seconds before the lift doors opened back up and Cutter stepped out into the _Salamander_'s bridge.

Officially known as the Combat Information Center, the bridge was the heart of any warship, where the officers controlled the ship and directed it during combat operations. It used to be that the bridge of most UNSC warships were located near their bows and had viewports that looked out into space. While it gave the officers a good view of the surrounding area, it also meant that enemy vessels also had a good view of where they needed to shoot to throw the ship into chaos.

During early phases of the Interstellar War, the UNSC High Command decided the then-current bridge arrangement provedâ€¦inadequate for the task of commanding a warship, especially after viewing the horrific casualty rates of UNSC ships that lost command and control due to the poor bridge placement. Thus beginning in 2477, all new UNSC warships were designed so that the bridge was located at the center of the ship surrounded by armor and decks in all directions. Any old warships also had their bridges transferred to a more suitable location within the interior of the ship.

Likewise, the UNSC _Salamander_ was built with not only this in mind, but was built to command ground operations as well. The bridge was a cavernous semi-circular room with over a dozen bridge stations. Crashseats welded to the floor and equipped with restraining harnesses were provided for all bridge personnel at their stations. The center of the room was dominated by a pair of raised platforms equipped with a large holotank at the middle of each platform. The holotanks also had crashseats welded to the floor around it that allowed the captain and his/her first officers to quickly secure themselves in an emergency. The crashseats were an Interstellar War innovation implemented on all UNSC ships when after-action reports revealed that the majority of all non-fatal injuries (and even some fatal ones) inflicted on bridge officers were found to have been caused by the officers being thrown into the floor, wall, and consoles whenever the ships were hit by weapons fire.

Medici turned around at the sound of the lift doors opening and snapped to attention.

"Captain on deck!" she shouted.

Immediately, every officer on the bridge was doing the same. It wasn't just that Cutter was the commanding officer either. Every man and woman on board respected and, hell, even liked the old man.

A corner of Cutter's mouth quirked up as he briefly returned their salutes. "At ease," Cutter said, causing the bridge officers to do just that and return to their work.

Cutter then proceeded to make his way to the central platform. He was about to say something to his XO when he noticed a rectangular, thermally-insulated container on the holotank. He gave Medici a questioning look while pointing the black container. Cutter's XO merely gave a nod as he reached out and opened it. The delicious

scent to hot food wafted out as he beheld the contents of the container: a piping hot roast beef sandwich with provolone, lettuce, tomato, bell peppers, and cucumbers between two pieces of good, warm rye bread.

With a heartfelt, whispered "thank you" to his XO, he reached in and began eating the wonderful sandwich, relishing the first bite of hot meat and bread and savoring the rich juices.

"Technically, you should thank Adamsen for that," Medici explained. "He was the one who actually made it. I was only the delivery girl."

"Then I'll have to thank the man later. This, was a life-saver," he declared after swallowing the last bite of sandwich. It had taken Cutter less than three minutes to demolish it.

It was then that Honor appeared on the holotank. **"Sir, shall we cast off now?"**

Cutter smiled at the AI's enthusiasm. "Yes, Honor. Sound general quarters. Set Condition Four. Alert Yard 21 to make preparations to cast off," Cutter ordered.

"Aye", sir."

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** Mess Hall**

****0630 hours****

Everyone in the mess hall started when the high-low-high whistle played over the LMC, as did everyone else in the ship.

"General quarters, general quarters. All hands man your battle stations. Up and forward to starboard, down and aft to port. Set Condition Four. This is not a drill. We are casting off from the shipyard. I repeat, this is not a drill.**"**

The sound of Honor's calm voice was instantly replaced with a blaring klaxon bell, loud enough to cut through to anyone and everyone's attention while still being quiet enough so that orders could still be heard via an ancient system called "shouting". Everyone began moving to their prescribed stations at a quick but orderly pace.

Anna quickly stood up. "See ya, guys!" she said as she shoved her tray into a slot in the wall that led into a washing machine and headed to the door that lead back to the hangar.

"Good thing we're already in armor then?" Taiga said to Jakob with a smirk.

Jakob's answer to that was to reach over to his side, grab his helmet, and put it over his head. The helmet clicked into place and sealed with a hiss as the UNSCMC-standard issue GRAM Powered Mass Utility armor was now completed.

"Still need weapons, though!" Jakob shouted as the helmet's speakers

amplified his words. "Let's get moving!" he shouted as he stood up.

"Yes, sir!" the rest of Team Vanguard shouted in unison as they placed their helmet over their heads and stood up.

It was when they were walking to the trays' wall slot that they felt the heavy thumping on the floor behind them.

"You guys need weapons?" Jakob asked Nogata and Togumi incredulously as the two Mgalekgolo followed behind Team Vanguard. Jakob didn't raise his voice this time; he knew the Mgalekgolos' hearing was sensitive enough to pick up his voice.

"No," Nogata began.

"_We_ are merely following _you_," Togumi continued.

"_You_ amuse _us_. _We_ will continue following _you_ for more amusement," Nogata finished.

Jakob looked to his team members, who shrugged in response. Jakob shrugged to the Mgalekgolo in return.

"Okaaaay, whatever flies your ship," he said before turning to his team. "Come on! Let's get moving, people! Move it, move it!"

They quickly shoved their trays into a wall slot and headed away to the armory to collect their weapons.

Only then, would they head to their stations to await whatever may come their way.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** Combat Information Center**

0640 hours

"All crew have reported they're at their assigned stations," Medici said as she finished putting on the clear, wide helmet of her Navy-regulation skinsuit.

'_10 minutes. Not bad, but not good either. Need to schedule more drilling,'_ Cutter thought as he finished doing the same.

"Good. Honor, turn that damn alarm off, will you?" Cutter ordered.

The blaring klaxon sound immediately cut off.

"Yard 21 reports they're ready to release the docking arms on your command, captain," _Salamander_'s communications officer, Petty Officer 3rd Class (PO3) Kreis Czarny, reported.

Cutter nodded at the young man's crisp delivery. "Very then, Petty Officer Czarny. You may tell them to release docking arms."

"Aye, sir." The black-haired Polish native immediately reported the

orders to the shipyard.

Outside, hundreds of massive clawed docking arms released their holds on various points of the _Salamander_'s hull with a series of clangs that was audible to the people inside the ship. They drew back and folded themselves into the walls of the shipyard.

"Shipyard reports all docking arms now released and folded. We're ready to go at any time," Czherny reported.

"Good. Tell the _Oblique Approach_ and the _Tale of the Bamboo Cutter_ to dock with us as soon as we clear the yard."

"Aye, sir."

While Czherny communicated with the two _Strident_-class heavy frigates on either side of the shipyard, Cutter turned to another officer, an elderly-looking Ibie'shan Kig-Yar with red quills on his head going grey with age. "Petty Officer Mor, make ready to launch the ship."

Petty Officer 1st Class Jal Nor, _Salamander_'s helmsman, nodded. "Aye, sir!" he answered in a deep raspy voice. Nor then pressed a button on his console that turned on the intercom to a very specific section of the ship. "Fetty Officer Gunther, are you ready vack there?!" he roared into the intercom.

"Yes," a woman's voice answered over the intercom. "All reactors are hot and ready to go. Just say 'when', sir," Petty Officer 2nd Class Isara Gunther reported crisply.

Nor grinned, bring his still-sharp fangs. "Excellent! Yhere to, caftain?"

Cutter looked to the central holotable. "Honor, bring up a star map of the system."

Immediately after, a holographic map of the Epsilon Eridani system formed above the holotable. A blinking dot appeared on the starmap just beyond the colony of New Belfast, the 4th planet in the system.

"There," Cutter said, pointing at the dot. "HIGHCOM has ordered us to rendezvous with our escorts at Epsilon Eridani's superior IJP (Interstellar Jump Point) before making the jump to Sol. We'll be setting course for there, but first we need to pick up our two escort ships first. Get us out of the shipyard first."

"Aye, sir," Nor replied while manipulating the controls. "Firing naneuvering thrusters."

Three nuclear fusion reactorsâ€"all of the prototype V77/X-HFR type â€"went active. The V77/X-HFR reactors, utilizing technology reversed-engineered from Covenant pinch fusion reactors, immediately started fusing Helium-3 together to produce massive amounts of plasma. The plasma generated by the reactors was then channeled through a series of manifolds designed to capture the heat and protons from the fusion reaction and convert them into electricity.

The electricity was then used to activate several maneuvering thrusters surrounding each of the fusion nozzles. In dozens upon dozens of tanks, liquid hydrogen was released into tanks to cool them and the thruster nozzles before being mixed with liquid oxygen, and ignited. The resulting superheated exhaustâ€"composed of water vapor with traces of ozone and hydrogen peroxideâ€"was ejected out the thruster nozzles, providing reasonable amounts of thrust without endangering surrounding ships and space stations.

The _Salamander_ exited Dock 21 at a stately pace and cleared the shipyard before firing the forward-pointing thrusters to arrest their forward momentum. The thrusters mounted around the bow began firing as well, slowly turning the massive ship to face the desired direction.

Two _Strident_-class heavy frigates then headed for the ship's underbelly.

"Honor, open the sub-vessel bay doors," Cutter ordered.

On the _Salamander_'s ventral side, two Cat-8 Sub-Vessel Deployment Bays sitting side-by-side opened massive, several meter-thick Titanium A5 doors as the two _Strident_s did a 180 and entered the bays engines first. One bore the name _Oblique Approach_ while the other bore the name _Tale of the Bamboo Cutter_, both painted on the side of the ships in white. The bay doors closed in front of them as large grappling arms secured the heavy frigates to the bay.

"**All ships are docked. We're ready to go, sir.**"

Cutter nodded at Honor. "Very good." He then turned back to Nor. "Honor, set condition X-Ray Yankee. Petty Officer Nor, set course for the superior IJP."

"**Aye, sir,**" Honor said as she made the announcement.

"Aye, sir," Nor replied while inputting commands into the console yet again. "Setting course for the IJP."

The H2/O2 thrusters shut off; their jobs done. For two of the fusion reactors though, their job was far from over. More Helium-3 was fused, but the plasma from this reaction did not go into the power manifolds. Instead, they went into a set of different manifolds that led directly into the fusion drive nozzles. Each nozzle suddenly flared with the bluish-white light of the Helium-4 plasma that was the result of the fusion process, producing even more thrust than the MPD thrusters could hope to achieve.

In short, each fusion reactor was detonating the equivalent of a 15 kiloton nuclear bomb and directing it out the primary thrusters. And it would continue to do so over and over again until the _Salamander_ had achieved the desired velocity.

The _Salamander_ built up delta-_v_ like a charging bull and was soon rocketing away from Reach's orbit. An aging and obsolescent _Stalwart_-class light frigate examining a Kig-Yar freighter's cargo for contraband flashed its running lights at _Salamander_ as it passed. The _Salamander_ flashed its own lights at the light frigate before speeding away into the star-lit void.

The ship soon reached the icy debris field that lay between Reach and Boreas. The debris fieldâ€dubbed Khione's Girdle by early explorersâ€consisted of millions of icy asteroids and rubble ranging from ice chips no bigger than a boulder to massive rounded chunks of ice and dust rivalling a small moon in size. Fortunately, Khione's Girdle's potential as a navigational hazard was defeated by the fact that all objects in the star system more or less followed the ecliptic plane. This meant that any ship looking to avoid the ice belt simply had to go above or below the ecliptic plane. That, and the fact that the chunks of ice were often separated by thousands of kilometers meant that a pilot or astrogator would have to be extraordinarily inept to collide with one. In this case, the _Salamander_ simply flew through it.

It was a few minutes after clearing the debris belt that an incoming communication was sent to the bridge from engineering. The ID signature identified it as coming from Dr. Voroshilov.

"Go ahead," Cutter answered.

Dr. Voroshilov's pale, thin face appeared on a viewscreen. **"Hello, Admiral Cutter. I have come to report that my companions and I have finished installing the Hermes** **Drive. We can begin the experiment at any time."**

"Thank you, Dr. Voroshilov. We'll let you know when we can begin."

Dr. Voroshilov nodded before ending the transmission.

Just as Cutter was about to turn back to the central holodeck and its information readouts repeated from the bridge stations, the main doors to the bridge slid open. Cutter turned to face the newcomers. One was a red-haired woman in her mid-30s with yellow-green eyes and a face still covered in freckles like a teenager. The other was a chestnut-haired, blue-eyed man also in his 30s. The only resemblance they shared was that both had the bronze oak leaf of a Lieutenant Commander on the shoulders of their uniforms. They both saluted Cutter.

"Admiral Cutter, Lieutenant Commander Cutter reporting in!" the red-haired woman shouted.

"Lieutenant Commander Whittaker here, reporting as ordered, sir," the chestnut-haired man said in a crisp British accent.

Cutter returned their salutes. "At ease, you two. You know I'm not one for ceremony."

The red-haired woman was the first to lower her salute. She smiled an easy smile at him. "Great! Then I can start calling you 'gramps', right gramps?" she said cheerfully.

Cutter winced as he stared into the mischievous yellow-green eyes of his granddaughter, Janet M. Cutter, Lieutenant Commander of the UNSC Navy, and captain of the UNSC _Oblique Approach_.

"Maybe not quite that relaxed, Lieutenant Commander Cutter. And I'm not that old," Cutter added testily.

Janet Cutter just grinned in response. "Aw, don't be so grouchy, gramps!" she shouted while walking up to the central platform. "Hey, Ange! How're you doing?" she asked Medici.

"Fine, thank you. How are you, Janet?" Medici replied.

As Cutter watched the two officers chat, he noticed Whittaker walk up beside him.

"If it helps, sir, it's easier to just go with the flow when dealing with her," Whittaker whispered.

"I've noticed, thank you," Cutter replied wearily.

Sir Andrew Whittaker, also a Lieutenant Commander of the UNSC Navy, and captain of the UNSC Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, smiled. "No problem, sir. Just making sure you were paying attention," the man said cheerily.

Cutter groaned as he returned his attention to the holotank.

Next on the list of destinations the Salamander passed was the orbit of the gas giant Boreas. It was a Jupiter-sized gas giant planet composed mostly of hydrogen and helium with trace amounts of methane, giving Boreas a characteristic blue color. The gas giant had no ring, but had no less than 28 moons orbiting it, 12 of which had colonies.

Next was the colony of New Belfast. It was an Earth-sized planet with abundant natural bodies of water. Freshwater rivers curved through the continents and massive freshwater lakes served as oceans. The colony had been the site of a brief rebellion that lasted for a month until the UNSC ended by agreeing to dismiss the then-current governor (who was horribly corrupt) and allowing the colonists to elect a new governor. The colonists were further satisfied when the former governor was given a long prison sentence for embezzling billions of credits from the colony's treasury, bribing Colonial Administration Authority (CAA) officials to ignore his crimes, and for fishing in restricted waters without a license. The Salamander also passed this by.

At last, after a little over 13 hour journey, the Salamander reached its rendezvous location at Epsilon Eridani's superior IJP. A fleet of ships was already waiting there to serve as Salamander's more-or-less permanent escort.

"I never thought I'd see the day the UNSC would gather that large a fleet just to escort just one ship," Cutter commented.

"Well, the Salamander not only uses, but holds a plethora of prototype and experimental technologies. I'd think HIGHCOM would want to make sure nothing happens to their very expensive ship, don't you think?" Medici asked.

Cutter merely nodded in agreement as he continued examining the fleet.

The escort fleet was indeed rather large. Formally named Battle Group X-Ray-7, it was composed of a cruiser squadron (CRURON) with 4 Autumn-class heavy cruisers, 3 destroyer squadrons (DESRON)

composed of 2 _Echidna_-class destroyers and 3 _Strident_-class heavy frigates each, a _Restitution_-class fast combat support ship, and a _Sahara_-class heavy prowler: a grand total of 21 ships.

All ships were arranged in a classic "battle-wall" formation, so named because a visual representation of their sensor ranges looked like a wall hanging in space. The formation was designed such that each ship had both their bows and sterns unobstructed so that they were able to make use of their magnetic accelerator cannons (MACs) and fusion drives without risk of hitting a friendly ship, while still leaving enough distance from one another to maintain a viable point-defense and sensor net and leaving room to maneuver to boot.

'_Truly, this is a powerful force. The addition of energy shields on all ships only makes it more powerful. Even that Covenant warship we fought over Harvest would have had the fight of its life against this,'_ Cutter thought.

Honor then interrupted any further thoughts from Cutter. ****"Sir, we have an incoming transmission from one of the cruisers, the
Sword of Damocles****."****

"Put it on screen," Cutter ordered.

A video link opened up on the bridge's main viewscreen, showing a blue-eyed woman in her mid-to-late 20's with black hair so dark it looked almost blue tied up in a tight bun. The bronze oak leaf of a Lieutenant Commander sat on her shoulders and engraved on the nametag across the right breast of her uniform was the name "KINGSTON".

The woman saluted. ****"Read Admiral Cutter. Lieutenant Commander Norah Kingston, at your service."****

Cutter returned the salute. "Lieutenant Commander Kingston, it's a pleasure to meet you." He looked at the woman, somewhat surprised at her young age. "Are you the highest ranking officer here?"

Kingston stiffened slightly. ****"Yes. Aside from you, I am the highest ranking officer here."****

Cutter immediately regretted his choice of words. Now he had no idea what to say to resolve this.

Fortunately, he didn't have to.

"Hey, Norah. How are you doing?" Medici greeted casually.

Kingston's gaze suddenly snapped to Medici as if she had just only noticed her presence (which she did). Her expression was almost indescribable. It wasn't quite detest, but she wasn't exactly overjoyed to see Medici either. It was somewhere in between.

****Ah, Medici. What a surprise to see you,**** Kingston greeted flatly.

"Aw, after so long, that's all you have to say? That's kind of sad," Medici answered back casually.

"Don't act so familiar with me! You're an officer of the UNSC! Act

like it!" Kingston snapped back in reply.

Meanwhile, Cutter just scratched his cheek in confusion. "Do you two know each other?" he asked.

A simultaneous answer of "Yes," and "Somewhat," came from Medici and Kingston respectively.

One of his graying eyebrows raised itself up. "Am I missing something here?"

"Pretty much," and "No," came from Medici and Kingston respectively, again in simultaneous chorus.

"**Quite the charming pair they make, don't they?"** a snarky feminine voice quipped in a British accent.

Cutter ears perked up at the familiar voice. "Is thatâ€|?"

An AI's avatar suddenly appeared on the bridge's central holotank next to Natsu, who jumped in surprise. The avatar was of a young woman with long brown hair wearing a long-sleeved white shirt and black pants with black boots. She looked perfectly human. The only difference, a difference which Natsu shared, was that her body shimmered with the pale, golden glow distinctive of current-generation smart AIs. She turned to Cutter and smirked.

"**Why Captain, you **_**must**_** be getting old. I didn't think you'd forget me so soon. Perhaps you should retire to a nice, comfy old people home? I've heard Brighton is quite lovely this time of year,"** the AI quipped.

Cutter smiled at the familiar bite of her voice. "It's good to see you too, Serina. How you've been?" he asked the former AI of his previous command.

"**Not bad, really. After they fixed that little problem I had with rampancy, I was assigned to the **_**Sword of Damocles**_**. The **_**Sword**_**'s computer banks are much roomier than the ones on the **_**Spirit**_**, so it's much more comfy here. My current captain is normally quite the bore. Can you believe she chose **_**Sic Semper Tyrannis**_** as the **_**Sword**_**'s motto? I mean really, how clichÃ© is that? Fortunately, she's so fun to tease. She gets completely flustered whenever I mention-"**

"**Anyway!"** Kingston said loudly, cutting off Serina mid-sentence. "**HIGHCOM informed me that you are due to jump with us to the Sol system. So would you please get movingâ€|sir."** Kingston said before cutting the transmission.

"Well, that wasâ€|interesting," Cutter said after a while.

"She certainly is, isn't she?" Medici commented.

Cutter cleared his throat. "In any event. Honor, take us to the center of the battle-wall. Contact Epsilon Eridani Traffic Control and get us a slot for a Slipspace jump. I want the fleet moving ASAP."

"**Yes, sir," **the AI reported enthusiastically before disappearing.

Epsilon Eridani Traffic Control was the system responsible for monitoring and directing all ships coming in and out of the star system, with the Interstellar Jump Point [3] being closely monitored in particular.

Seven seconds after the order was given, Honor returned. "**Traffic Control reports this section of the IJP will be clear for departure in ten minutes.**"

Cutter nodded. "Understood. Alert the fleet that we'll be making the jump in ten minutes. And connect me to the LMC."

"**Aye, cap'n.**"

As soon as the connection was established, Cutter began his ship-wide announcement.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** Engineering Deck**

1948 hours

All members of Team Vanguard looked up as the LMC, the ship's public address channel, came on. Cutter's voice was clearly audible, even over the LMC.

"**Attention all hands, attention all hands! We will be making the jump to the Sol system in 10 minutes. Secure all loose equipment and prepare for slipspace jump. That is all.**"

"Sol, huh. Haven't been back to Earth in a while. Haven't been back to New Mombasa in a while either. It feels like ages since we last got some down time," Jakob said wistfully. "Hey, Taiga. You got any plans when we get to Sol?"

Taiga held a finger to her chin as she thought. "I think I'll go visit my family in Crisium City. I haven't seen them in a long, long time. I wonder if _nee_-san would recognize me?" she wondered.

Sar looked back and forth from Jakob to Taiga as they reminisced about their families and she sighed. "Now I want to go visit mama's ship," Sar muttered in Kig-Yar.

Tak laid a 3-clawed hand on Sar's shoulder. "There, there. I'm sure we'll get enough time to head back to the _Law of Reciprocity _for a bit. We'll even make sure to bring back souvenirs for everyone, won't we?" Tak asked in Kig-Yar as well.

Sar immediately cheered up. "Yes! Let's do that!" she screeched in Kig-Yar, causing Jakob and Taiga to jump in shock.

"Wow! You nearly gave me a heart attack from that!" Jakob shouted as Sar looked back in confusion. The innocent expression on her tilted face through the currently unpolarized visor dispelled his anger pretty quickly. After he'd calmed down some, Jakob asked Sar, "So

what are you going to do once we get to Sol?"

Sar hopped up and down in excitement. "Tak and me go visit Earth! Buy souvenirs! Go visit mama's ship!" she answered back energetically.

Jakob and Taiga laughed at how eager Sar was while Tak just bared his fangs a little in a grin. "So which one of Earth's many cities are you going to visit while you're there?" Jakob asked.

Sar stopped hopping and thought about it, tilting her head as she thought. After a few minutes, she answered, "Don't know. Which city is best?"

"New Mombasa," Jakob answered immediately.

"Crisium City," Taiga answered immediately as well.

Silence filled the area they were guarding as the two simultaneous answers echoed through the air.

"Crisium City?! You're kidding me!" Jakob cried. "Crisium City's not even on Earth; it's on Luna! Not to mention, New Mombasa beats Crisium City any day!" Jakob declared.

"What?! No way! What's so great about New Mombasa anyway?" Taiga asked.

"Okay, let me tell you." Jakob held up a hand with fingers splayed.

"One," he retracted his index finger. "They rebuilt the Mombasa Tether back in 2560 and it's now stronger than ever. The city's now a thriving center of trade again.

"Two," he retracted his middle finger. "The people there are the nicest in the world, especially since dad became police chief. No corrupt police means no angry citizens.

"Three," he held down his ring finger. "Jonas's kebabs are the best in the galaxy.

"Four," he held down his pinky. "The Uplift Nature Reserve is still there. In fact, it was one of the few structures to survive the glassing of the city. They have elephants, zebras, lions, hippos, and even Moas from Reach!

"Five," he started to hold down his thumb, but he stopped as he couldn't think of anything more to say about his home city. "Fiveâ€¦fiveâ€¦isâ€¦the skyscrapers are tall," he finished lamely. When no one said anything, he added, "The tallest skyscraper in New Mombasa is the Memorial Tower at 2,140 meters tall."

After a few moments of silence, Tak was the first to offer an opinion. "You started off well, and you almost finished perfectly, but you stumbled at the end. I give that a 7.5 out of 10," he commented like a judge at a race.

"Uh, thanks?" Jakob said.

Taiga by now looked fit to burst. "Oh, yeah? Well Crisium City has that, and more! There's the Mare Crisium Mass Driver Complex, the Tranquility Base Museum, the _Hatenko_ _Douji_ Dojo, _Shimadori_ Ramen, Curry Palace, and Russian Sushi," she listed off.

Another few moments of silence passed by.

"Okay, I see some problems in those," Jakob said. "One, the Tranquility Base Museum is hundreds of miles to the city's southwest. Two, why a dojo of all places? Three, ramen is boring. Four, why curry? And five, what the hell is Russian Sushi?!"

"It's sushi, but Russian!" Taiga countered. "It's really good! And ramen is not boring! Your kebab guy is boring!"

"What?! He's not boring! Your dojo is boring!" Jakob counter-counter.

As they started bickering over which highlights of their cities they think is the best, Sar turned to Tak. "Both cities sound great. Let's make some time to visit both," Sar said to Tak in Kig-Yar.

Tak scratched his chin as he thought. "It will be tricky making the schedule, but I think it's workable. I'm sure everyone will appreciate the souvenirs we get too," Tak answered back in Kig-Yar as well.

Sar and Tak continued discussing their vacation plans even as Jakob and Taiga continued their bickering.

* * *

><p>Epsilon Eridani Interstellar Jump Point

UNSC **_Salamander**_** Combat Information Center**

1958 hours

Cutter watched as a massive _Parabola_-class freighter exited from a slipspace portal in the IJP and glided past the fleet.

"**This is Epsilon Eridani Traffic Control to Battle Group X-Ray-7, you may commence slipspace jump at this time,**" the monitoring station reported.

"**The ship is in formation and all ships report their slipspace drives are spun up and ready to go, sir." **Honor's usual calm was now tinged with excitement.

Cutter smiled. The thought of returning back to Sol to his wife filled his heart with joy. "Excellent, Honor. Tell the fleet to make the jump," Cutter ordered.

"**Yes, sir.**"

Moments later, slipspace portals of varying sizes opened up in front of the ships. The portals were bluish-white at their rims while their centers were pitch-black, like holes carved in space-time itself.

Each ship then extended metal spikes from various points around the bow and stern. The spikes crackled with energy as the space began warping around them in an ovoid bubble shape. As the ships moved, the bubbles traveled with them.

Another few moments later, the ships entered the slipspace portals along with their bubbles of normal space. The crew of the ships felt the act of entering slipspace as an indescribable sensation washing over their bodies. A few people became nauseous from the strange sensations, but most were unaffected due to either their own natural resistance or from repeated exposure. Moments after the ships entered the portals, they collapsed behind them, leaving nothing but the void of space and the light of the stars as the fleet were sent on their way to Sol.

* * *

><p>Sol Interstellar Jump Point

UNSC **_Sword of Damocles **_**Combat Information Center**

The next day

0728 hours

Kingston watched in relief through the viewscreen as the fleet safely transitioned back in to normal space.

'_I know the risks of travelling through slipspace these days are much, much lower than it had been when the Shaw-Fujikawa drive was first invented, but stillâ€|'_ she thought.

"Serina, contact EARTHCOM for the _Salamander_'s location and set out course for them," Kingston ordered.

"**Aye, captain, communicating wiâ€|captain, I'm getting a priority message from the Pluto Early Warning Station. They're relaying a high priority message from EARTHCOM. Patching it through now.**"

A small box blinked into existence on the main viewscreen before enlarging into view. On it, the face of Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was displayed, the five stars of his rank clearly visible on his shoulder pauldrons. Despite being in his mid-80's, he still looked no more than 40. His normally calm face was now wrinkled with worry and in the background, his staff was moving with frantic purpose.

"**Lieutenant Commander Kingston, has the **_**Salamander**_** arrived with you?"** the old admiral asked.

Kingston's eyes widened in surprise. "No, Admiral. They were supposed to have arrived long before us. What happened?"

The admiral's expression grew grim. "**It's what didn't happen that has us worried. The **_**Salamander**_** was supposed to have arrived immediately after making the jump to Sol according to the specifications of the new drive they were testing. It didn't. We'd assumed, or rather, we were hoping that they'd decided to use more normal methods to traverse slipspace. Now thoughâ€|,** Admiral Hood took a deep breath. "**I'm officially declaring a Broken

Arrow."**

Kingston sat back down on her crashseat hard. The codeword Broken Arrow had once been used to designate an accidental event involving nuclear weapons that did not create the risk of nuclear war. Nowadays, it was used to designate a UNSC ship lost by means other than combat.

"**I'm ordering all available ships to sweep the area between here and Reach for the **_**Salamander**_**. Hopefully we'll find them. Hood out." **The transmission cut off after that.

Sitting in her crashseat, Kingston was lost in her own thoughts. She thought about the missing ship with over 24,000 people on board, but it was one in particular she was thinking about currently. She had not seen Angelina Medici since their graduation from the Luna OCS Academy, and their reunion had caught her by surprise.

Her relationship with Medici was complicated. She was her classmate, coworker, self-proclaimed rival (long story), and self-proclaimed eternal arch-enemy (even longer story), but she was also the closest thing Kingston had to a true friend. And she was not someone who would abandon her friends.

Her eyes took on a determined light. "Serina."

"**Yes, captain?"** the AI asked without her usual snark.

"Inform HIGHCOM that Battle Group X-Ray-7 will be participating in the search for the UNSC _Salamander_ as of right now." Kingston's expression turned into a grim smile. "I swear upon my honor as an officer of the UNSC that we'll find the _Salamander_ and bring her and her crew home, or we'll die trying. Now turn this ship around!"

"**Aye, captain. Setting course for an extremely low probability of success SAR mission that might or might not result in our deaths. Huzzah."**

Kingston gave the AI a stern look, but quickly turned her attention back to the holotank as the entire fleet did a 180.

'_For god's sakes, why is this always happening to you, Captain?_' Serina thought. '_First the _Spirit_, now the _Salamander_? One might think you were cursed to disappear on us. At least the _Salamander_ is tougher than your last shipâ€¦I hope.'_'

* * *

><p>504**th**** "Ardor Witches" Joint Fighter Wing Base, Pratica de Mare, Romagna, Earth**

March 5, 1945 (Operation Trajanus + 1 day)

Captain Marian E. Carl

1905 hours

Marian sat on a steel bench outside the base's medical wing in the waiting room. Her foot tapped a steady rhythm as she waited for news

on how her friend, Junko Takei, was doing and whether or not she could see her.

After what seemed like eternity to her, a girl with blonde hair tied into a ponytail and wearing the uniform of the Romagnan Air Force walked towards her.

"You're Captain Carl, right?" the girl asked.

Marian immediately stood up and snapped to attention. "Yes, ma'am. Captain Marian Carl, 506th. How is-"

The girl held up a hand, cutting Marian off. "Calm down. My name is Martina Crespi, Tenente of the Romagnan Air Force, proud member of the Pantaloni Rossi [4], and currently assigned to the 504th Joint Fighter Wing."

She gave a slight grin. "Though we are currently indisposed now and will not be available for some time," she joked and laughed half-heartedly. When Marian did not react, she stopped and her current expression was replaced by something more somber. "You're here to see, Capitano Takei, right?" she asked.

Marian nodded.

"Well, she's awake, soâ€¦I guess you can visit. But be very quiet, or Fernandia will yell at you."

'_She sounds like she's talking from experience,'_ Marian thought as she followed Martina through the double doors.

After passing through several hallways, they finally arrived in a quiet room filled with beds. Filling those beds were several sleeping members of the 504th JFW. One wasn't, and she turned her head at the sight of Marian presence.

"Ah, Marian-chan. Konnichiwa," Captain Junko Takei said pleasantly.

Marian gulped. "Konnichiwa," she answered awkwardly as she walked over and pulled over a chair to sit next to one of her dearest friends.

Marian had been shocked at her friend's state. The last time Marian had seen her, Junko was a healthy young woman with a calm, peaceful demeanor that could bring peace of mind to anyone who talked with her. Junko still had that demeanor, but it was now a fragile thing that seemed like it could break at any time. Her face was pale and gaunt and her eyes were sunken into her skull, as if she hadn't eaten for many weeks.

"I don't look like much, do I?" Junko asked calmly, startling Marian out of her reverie.

"Um, no, I mean, not really, I mean, wellâ€¦" Marian trailed off.

Junko giggled lightly, though even that little effort strained her. "Don't worry about it, Marian-chan. I'm practically uninjured compared to some of my girls." She looked over to her right.

Marian followed her gaze until her eyes rested on the still form of Dominica S. Gentile laying on the next bed over. If anything, she looked even more pale and gaunt than Junko. If not for the slight movement of her breathing, Marian would've thought her to be a corpse instead of a living person. Snoring next to Dominica was her girlfriend, Jane T. Godfrey, who looked healthy and uninjured, though her brow was wrinkled with worry. One hand was clasped over Dom's.

Marian could only stare at the condition of the 504th's top ace. "Ho-How did sheâ€¦!"

Junko shook her head. "From what the medics told me, Dom had pushed Jane out of the path of a Neuroi beam and took the hit. The beam went through her right lung and flash-boiled the surrounding tissue, almost completely destroying half the organ. Malvezzi had to work hard to reconstruct the lung with her powers while making sure her other teammates didn't bleed to death in the meantime."

Marian stared at Dom for a few moments longer before returning her gaze to Junko. "So where is Malvezzi anyways?" she asked.

Junko gestured with her chin and Marian looked to her right to see Fernandia Malvezzi soundly asleep with what appeared to be a half-eaten chocolate bar grasped in one hand and a medical textbook about human anatomy in the other. Marian watched as Martina from earlier carefully removed the chocolate bar and placed it on the desk next to her, then just the carefully fixed the blanket.

The brunette witch mumbled cutely in her sleep as Martina pulled the blanket up to cover Fernandia's shoulders. The blond Romagnan witch noticed the two looking at her and held up a finger to her mouth to ask for quiet.

"She's been working hard. Malvezzi's been running back and forth between us and the mundane pilots who've been injured. No wonder's she's so tired," Junko explained.

Several moments of silence passed before Marian could work up the nerve to ask her question. "Um, Junko, what happened out there? After your encounter with the humanoid Neuroi, I mean."

Junko's eyes took on a distant look as she recalled the events from yesterday. "It seemed like it was going well with the meeting, then that thing showed up. Planes fell left and right, forcing us to divide our time between protecting them and engaging the Neuroi coming out of that hive. I saw Mazzei go down with a chunk of her thigh gone, and Nishiki had to pull out after being blinded by a Neuroi beam. Then after I was hit, everything went dark. I remember waking up afterwards with Malvezzi over me. She said a Neuroi beam had hit in my right kidney." She laughed lightly again. "I told her to go heal the others and that people could live with one kidney, but she would have none of it." Junko then turned her head and stared straight into Marian's eyes. "Marian-chan. That Neuroi saved me."

Marian stared at her in shock. "You mean that humanoid Neuroi. But why?"

Junko shook her head. "I don't know. All I know is that if it hadn't shoved me out of the way when it did, I would've have died when the hive fired its beam. Why did it do that? Why?" As she rambled on, Junko's voice got quieter and her eyes drooped closed. "_Naze kaâ€|_" she muttered in Fusoan before finally falling asleep.

Marian got up and fixed Junko's blanket. "_Oyasumi_, Junko," Marian said quietly in Fusoan.

As she watched Junko's sleeping face and saw how weak and vulnerable she looked, Marian placed her forehead on Junko's. She willed some of her own strength to go into the Fusoan witch and hoped that it helped.

As Marian started to pull back though, she noticed Junko's lips. They looked so soft and pink. Her lips slowly drifted towards those inviting lips of their own willâ€|

Marian managed to stop herself with less than a millimeter to spare. She drew back sharply and shook herself.

'_What the fuck am I doing?_ _She's practically in a coma right now, and all you can think about is taking advantage of her? Pathetic!'
_Marian chided herself.

Then Marian suddenly remembered she wasn't alone. She turned to her right and suddenly found herself looking at the grinning face of Martina Crespi.

"Sooo, you like Captain Takei, huh?" she teased.

Marian felt a blush go up into her face as it turned as bright a red as a ripe tomato. "N-No. Tha-That was aâ€|aâ€|I was justâ€|checking her lips forâ€|chapping," she finished lamely.

Martina's grin got wider, to about Cheshire cat level. "Ohhh?" She then skipped out of the room singing quietly, "Marian likes Junko, Marian likes Junko."

A vein bulged on Marian's temple. "Hey, get back here, you brat," she hissed quietly as she chased Martina, leaving the room basked in silence once more.

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: The word "dyke", as used by Tony, was a derogatory term for homosexual women dating back to the early 20th century. The exact origin of the word "dyke" has been lost to history, but historians generally agree that the term originated from the word "bulldyker", which itself was also a derogatory word term for a homosexual woman, indicating that "dyke" was simply a contraction. Regardless, the use of the word "dyke" as a derogatory word to refer to homosexual women continued until the late 20th and early 21st century, when the word started to be reclaimed by LGBT groups as a symbol of pride. By the end of the 21st century, "dyke" had completely lost its negative connotations and had even inspired other terms such as "dyking" to refer to going out with someone of the same gender, regardless of the person's actual gender. As homosexuality became part of mainstream

culture, the word "dyke" gradually fell out of usage in favor of more modern terms. By the mid-23rd century, "dyke" had completely disappeared from usage in Standard English and was now considered obsolete, with only a few Outer Colony worlds still using it. As a result, few people born in the Inner Colonies, or even the vast majority of the Outer Colonies, even know what the word means anymore.

[2]: The Mgalekgolo used three different forms of "we". "We" was used to refer to a single Lekgolo colony; there was no Mgalekgolo word for "I" since they do not regard individual Lekgolo as sentient. "_We_" was used exclusively to refer to a pair of bond brothers since they tended to think of themselves as two parts of a whole. "***We***" was used to refer to the Lekgolo as a species. While individual colonies thought of themselves as separate individuals (with the exception of bond brothers), they did have some concept of unity as a species and "***we***" was a perfect example of this. Note that the same rules applied to the Mgalekgolo word for "you" and that they applied those terms to other species as well.

[3]: Interstellar Jump Points are a term for the edge of a star system's gravity well, which provide ideal conditions for entering and exiting slipspace. Any ship jumping to and from a system's IJP can expect to arrive faster and in a more consistent time and location than if the ship were to make a random slipspace jump. Using the IJP also imposes less of a burden on the ship's slipspace drive and reduces wear and maintenance cost, making use of IJPs particularly attractive to freighter captains.

[4]: The _Pantaloni Rossi_ were an elite witch unit serving in the Romagnan Air Force. The name literally means "Red Pants", as they wore red panties to signify their elite status. The _Pantaloni Rossi_ were credited with some of the highest kill counts in Romagna during the Human-Neuroi War.

4. Chapter 2

A/N: Hi there again! Welcome to the next chapter of HalCoN. I've had a rash of inspiration lately, so I finished this chapter pretty early.

And as before, please leave a review, at least a sentence's worth. Single word responses are not reviews. And no flames, please.

Aaaaand, let's begin!

* * *

><p>Chapter 2- Where's Captain Nemo When You Need Him?!

Slipspace

UNSC **_Salamander**_** CIC**

March 4, 2575

0918 hours (+/- 0.3 seconds)

James Cutter looked at the wall-mounted viewscreens, each broadcasting its view of the outside area using feeds from externally-mounted cameras, and stared at the view; or more precisely, the utter lack of one. Since slipspace lacked any light in the visible spectrum, no matter where you looked, there was only darkness.

Due to that little oddity of slipspace, it was quite easy for Cutter to turn his attention away from the view.

'_Once you've seen one section of slipspace, you've seen them all,'_ Cutter thought wryly.

"Honor, connect me to Dr. Voroshilov. I think it's about time we see if that new drive does what he said it would do," James Cutter ordered.

"**Aye, sir. Connecting to Doc Voroshilov's COMPAD.**"

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** Engineering Deck**

0918 hours (+/- 0.3 seconds)

Dr. Voroshilov looked up from inspecting his Hermes Drive as his COMPAD started playing its ringtone (Back to the Future Overture, if you wanted to know).

"**Sir, your COMPAD is ringing,**" Guileless Curiosity the monitor pointed out as it hovered near him.

"Thank you, Curiosity. I am aware of that," Dr. Voroshilov replied as he pulled the black tablet out of a pocket on his lab coat. He looked at the caller ID signature. It was Admiral Cutter, of course. Dr. Voroshilov pressed a button on the flat, rectangular device to accept the COM and Rear Admiral Cutter's face blinked into existence on the screen. "What is it, Rear Admiral Cutter?" Dr. Voroshilov asked.

"**Dr. Voroshilov, we've entered slipspace and are almost ready to begin running your slipspace drive-**"

"Hermes Drive," Dr. Voroshilov corrected.

There was silence for a moment before Cutter continued. "**Yes, your Hermes Drive. As I said, we're almost ready to begin. After I make an announcement to the crew, you may start it up.**"

The COM transmission cut off. A moment later, there was the familiar chime of a public address message as Cutter made his announcement.

"**Attention all hands, this is Cutter speakingâ€|**"

Dr. Voroshilov stopped paying attention to it at that point. It was something about setting Condition Three, but it did not concern him. "Sentinels, help me perform a final check on the Hermes Drive," he

ordered.

The various Aggressor, Assembler, Constructor, and Enforcer Sentinels floating around beeped a confirmation and they began flying around the large device in the room, scanning it with bright blue beams from hyperspectral imaging equipment for any defects that might interfere with its operation.

"**Are you sure this is quite necessary?"** Curiosity asked. "**We've already examined the Hermes Drive for defects 6 times in the past 3 hours and 54 minutes. I'm sure we would've already found any defects already if they'd existed.**"

Dr. Voroshilov turned to face the monitor. "Nonsense. There is no harm in checking everything once more. In fact, there is every reason to do so. I have watched far too many science fiction holo-films of experiments that have gone horribly wrong just because someone did not check their procedures and/or equipment thoroughly enough. I have not come this far just to have my experiment fail because of something so utterly meaningless and pedestrian," he said firmly.

Curosimy thought long and hard about Dr. Voroshilov's words. Though with the monitor's processing speed, it took less than a fraction of a second for it to formulate a reply. "**Your logic holds true. Very well, then," **Curiosity answered simply.

A few minutes later, Cutter's announcement ended and Cutter contacted Dr. Voroshilov once more. "**That's it. You have a go,**" Cutter said over Dr. Voroshilov's COM pad.

At that moment, the Sentinels returned from their examination of the Hermes Drive. "**All scans completed,**" an Aggressor Sentinel reported. "**No defects detected. Slight contamination of Fuse 31 by the substance called 'dirt' detected. Situation resolved.**"

Dr. Voroshilov breathed out in relief and headed over to the control panel sitting just in front of the Hermes Drive. He sat down on the crashseat and locked himself in. He pressed a series of buttons that caused the massive cylindrical device to power up with a hum. The device glowed with a white light that bathed the room.

"Today, history shall record this moment as the birth of a new age of instantaneous FTL travel," Dr. Voroshilov declared as he reached over with his left hand and flipped up a covering, revealing a blue switch underneath.

"_Sic itur ad astra,_ [1]" he spoke quietly as he flipped the switch.

Outside, the _Salamander_'s bow was suddenly bathed in white light as a small disc of negative mass particles appeared in front of the ship. The bridge officers watched with fascination as the disc quickly expanded and soon enveloped the entire 3.5 kilometer bulk of the ship in a massive bubble. As soon as the bubble was complete, the surrounding space rippled and the bubble collapsed and disappeared, taking the ship with it.

* * *

><p>Location: Unknown (Tentative Name: Extra-Dimensional Space)

****UNSC **_**Salamander**_** CIC****

****March 4, 2575 (Presumably)****

****Time: Error. Calculation failure. Recalculatingâ€|****

As the bubble of negative mass particles faded, all eyes in the bridge were glued to the images being displayed on the wall-mounted viewscreens. The feed from the external cameras showed a spacescape that bore as much a resemblance to slipspace as an elephant did to an ant; in other words, not at all.

The surrounding space was a tie-dye of Technicolor filaments, clouds, and assorted indescribable objects that made the scenery look as though they were in a drug addict's hallucination of a nebula. There were no stars, but strange glowing storms spiraled everywhere in the distance and seemed to take the place of stars. The occasional lightning flashed in the distance, completely at odds with the laws of physics, and strange lights danced far off into the gloom.

After a while, Cutter found his voice again. "Does anyone know where we are?" he asked.

Nobody on the bridge answered, for nobody had the slightest idea where the hell this was.

"We are currently within the realm I have tentatively called Extra-Dimensional Space,**" Dr. Voroshilov explained, making several bridge officers jump as they'd forgotten that he was still connected to the bridge. **"This area, according to my observation of the data collected by my drones, is outside our known dimension and even outside slipspace altogether. As you can see, this space is far different from slipspace."****

Nobody spoke for several moments. "How is thisâ€|possible?" de Medici asked incredulously. "Where is the light illuminating the area coming from?"

"For your first question, Lieutenant Commander** **de Medici, I have already explained how my Hermes Drive's operation to you and Rear Admiral Cutter. For your second, I am unsure, but I believe those hurricane-like objects are providing the visible light necessary for illumination."****

"What are they?" PO3 Czherny asked as he adjusted his glasses for a better view.

"I am not entirely certain. I have sent drones to investigate them, but as they moved closer to the objects, the drones were drawn towards them, as if they were a high-gravity object. Contact with the drones were lost when they entered the 'eye' of the hurricane-like objects. For that reason, I believe it is best that we avoid them for the time being."****

Cutter nodded. "Agreed. So how do we get out of thisâ€|place?" he asked.

"**Coordinates in Extra-Dimensional Space corresponds on a point-by-point basis with coordinates in slipspace much like how slipspace corresponds with n-space on a point-by-point basis. All we have to do is travel to the coordinates that corresponds to where slipspace corresponds with the Sol system and activate the Hermes Drive once more to travel back to the corresponding slipspace coordinates. Once back in slipspace, all we need to do is exit it,"** Dr. Voroshilov explained.

Cutter found himself becoming more and more exasperated with Dr. Voroshilov's long-winded explanations. "And where exactly are these coordinates we have to travel to?" he ground out.

"**Curiosity?"** Dr. Voroshilov asked.

Moments later, a hologram of the monitor Guileless Curiosity suddenly appeared above the central holotank next to Honor.

"**Hello again, sirs!"** the monitor chirped happily. "**I'll be acting as your navigator for this trip. Just follow the waypoints I'm going to set up and we'll be just fine."**

"**Indeed," **Honor said, flatly. "**In the future though, could you not access the ship's systems without my permission? I would rather not have to launch a counterattack on your systems out of reflex."**

"**My apologies, Ms. Harrington,"** the monitor apologized before saying, "**Well, shall we get going?"**

Soon after, a virtual representation of the surrounding space appeared above the holotank with the Salamander sitting at the center. A series of glowing dots connected by lines began just off the bow and disappeared off the hologram.

All the bridge officers and Honor looked to Cutter for her answer.

"Well, it beats sitting around here all day and waiting for something to happen," Cutter answered after a moment of thought. "Honor, set Condition One and follow those dots," he ordered.

"You're expecting an attack, sir?" De Medici asked.

"Notâ€|sure," Cutter said slowly. "But I'd rather be prepared for nothing rather than have something happen and not be prepared for it."

"**Aye, sir. Sounding general quarters," **Honor said as the bridge officers felt a slight tugging as the fusion drives fired back up, along with a gradual loss of gravity as the Condition One setting slowly disabled all artificial gravity throughout the ship as a power-saving measure. Alarms shrilled their whines, preparing the ship for an attack that may or may not come.

The Salamander followed the glowing dots like breadcrumbs left in the forest for what seemed like an eternity. While the ship was gliding along, the bridge officers passed the time by enjoying the view and wondering what the hell they were looking at.

"This looks like a nebula, but it can't be," de Medici commented after a while. "Real nebulae aren't supposed to be this dense. This is almost like an atmosphere in density."

"**According to my sensors," **Honor noted. **"The surrounding area **_**is**_** actually filled with some kind of gaseous material."**

Every one of the bridge officers was astonished by this fact. "Are you saying we _are_ in some kind of atmosphere?" Cutter asked Honor, incredulously.

"**I don't know. The gas is at an extremely low density, about 1/50 the density of Earth's atmosphere, and I can't determine what kind of material it is made out of. My external sensors are not built to conduct scientific examinations like this. I'll have to take a sample for further analysis,"** Honor reported.

"**Please do. In fact, take additional samples. I wish to analyze it as well,"** Dr. Voroshilov quickly added.

PO3 Czherny had a look of contemplation on his face. "You know, if this is an atmosphere, wouldn't that mean there might be life here?" the young noncom asked.

Everyone on the bridge became silent at the suggestion.

"But that's im-" Cutter closed his mouth before he finished the word "impossible", as many so-called "impossible" things had happened recently.

PO3 Czherny shook his head. "Never mind, you're right. There's no way anything could be living out he-"

Before he could finish his statement, Honor interrupted. "**Captain, I'm detecting an unknown energy signature. Whatever it is, it's big and heading right for u-"**

Honor didn't get to finish her report either, for at that moment, something struck the ship hard enough to throw anyone who wasn't strapped in to the ground, and anyone who was still felt like they'd been punched in the chest as the ship tilted wildly.

"The hell happened?!" Cutter shouted over the din of collision alarms.

"**Captain, we've been rammed by the unknown contact. Shields are down to 10% strength, and I dare say it won't last another impact."** Honor reported with distinct calm.

"What contact?!" Cutter shouted back.

The viewscreens shifted their feed upwards and everyone on the bridge gasped/squawked in surprise and shock.

Floating a few hundred kilometers above them was what appeared to be a giant space squid. The creature had a hollow, cylindrical body that slightly tapered at one end. Large fins were located at the tapered end, while over a dozen long, whip-like tentacles sprouted from the untapered end. The creature did not have a visible mouth, but several

dark purple "eyes" were located radially along the body behind the tentacles. Its body appeared to be transparent, though no organs could be seen. Instead, the transparent body glowed with a bluish-white light and electricity crackled along its "skin". The creature bobbed along as though it was dazed from its impact with the _Salamander_.

"What the hell is that?" PO3 Czherny asked incredulously.

Whittaker stared at the thing with an opened-jawed expression. "Why, it looks like a giant squid! But how is that possible?!" he asked incredulously

"Natsu, take us up to maximum military thrust! Get us out of here while that thing is still stunned!" Cutter ordered.

"**Aye, sir. Bringing us up to maximum acceleration,**" Honor said.

The ship's fusion drives started to increase their power, but before they could make any significant headway, another impact threw the ship and everyone in it for a loop.

"**Shields are now offline," **Honor reported.

The external cameras panned to show another one of those space squids attached to the hull near the port engine pod, its long tentacles wrapped around the ship in a bear-er-squid hug. Now that they had a size comparison to look at, the bridge officers could see that the thing was huge. Its main body alone was almost half a kilometer long. Combined with the length of its tentacles, it was almost a third as long as the _Salamander_.

"How the hell didn't we detect it?!" Janet Cutter shouted.

"**It would appear that this 'atmosphere' is interfering with my sensors. I will have to recalibrate soon, or I might as well fly with a blindfold on,**" Honor replied.

"Activate all point defense cannons! Take that son of a bitch down!" Cutter shouted.

Outside on the _Salamander_'s hull, MEV7-Bastion Nonlinear Point-Defense Pulse Cannons rose up from their recessed mountings and each one of their four mirrors angled towards the space squid. As soon as they were properly oriented, each laser cluster sent out four blue beams of focused light. Free-electron lasers, each individual mirror pumping out 5 megajoule lasers per shot, burned into the space squid like azure lances.

Even the mighty Mark 2563 Onager MACs in their twin turrets added their weight of fire to the barrage, sending 50cm slugs at 180 rounds per minute at the creature. The two-and-a-half ton ferrous tungsten jacketed, depleted uranium rounds fired by the Onagers were shot out at 3,000 km/s and were capable of penetrating even the thickest armor and were murder on shield generators.

That was, if they had any effect on the space squid. As it was, the creature was mostly unfazed by the firepower being thrown at it. The half-meter slugs from the Onagers bored holes through the creature's

body that closed up in seconds without seeming to faze it. The lasers seemed to be the only weapons that had any sort of effect on the creature, making it screech in agony. Unfortunately, its tentacles whipped out and smashed into the Bastions firing on it, destroying them and reducing them to slag and debris that whipped away under the ship's massive acceleration.

The bridge officers watched the firestorm with frustrated expressions.

"Tell the Fortresses and Onagers to cease fire! They're just wasting ammo shooting at that thing!" Cutter ordered.

As the electromagnetic guns shut themselves off, the space squid began moving, crushing an Onager with a tentacle as it moved along the hull, gripping with its tentacles.

"Where the hell is it going?" Cutter asked out of combination frustration and confusion.

De Medici's eyes widened as she saw it head towards the stern and extend its tentacles towards the nozzles of the fusion drives. "Captain! It's trying to get in through the nozzles!" she shouted.

"Shut down the port nozzles and seal them off! I don't want that thing getting so much as a tentacle tip in my ship!" Cutter ordered.

"**Sealing nozzlesâ€|damn it!**" Honor snarled, uncharacteristically fierce for her. "**The creature is melting through the blast doors. They won't hold.**"

"Shit!" Cutter cursed. "Send security teams down there now!"

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** Engineering Deck**

Time: Unknown (Still Recalibrating)

"**Security Alert! Security Alert! Away the Security Alert team to port engine room. Away the Back-up Alert force to port engine room. All hands not involved in Security Alert stand fast! We have an intruder in port engine room. Bring heavy weapons. I repeat, bring heavy weapons.**"

"What kind of intruder are we facing that needs heavy weapons?!" Taiga shouted as Team Vanguard zoomed down the hall to Reactor One in null G.

"I believe the question is: how did an intruder get aboard while we're in _slipspace_?!" Tak pointed out.

"Less talking, more maneuvering!" Jakob paused to grab a handhold, swing around, then release to change vector without losing much speed. "Now go, go, go!" Jakob urged them on as they followed his maneuver.

Seeing as how they were already on the Engineering Deck when the alert was given, it didn't take long for Team Vanguard to get to the door with "Engine Room - Port" marked above.

"Stack up," Jakob said quietly to his team, who proceeded to flip around and use their boosters to slow down and land on either side of the door with weapons at the ready. Once they were in place, Jakob nodded to Taiga, who opened a small panel above the airlock control console, revealing a small handle. This little device was installed in all airlock doors and were designed to allow someone to check to see if there was any atmosphere on the other side. The telltale hiss of escaping atmosphere when Taiga pulled the handle told everyone that there was none.

"Shit," Taiga cursed as she released the handle and closed the panel.

"Everyone make sure your suits are sealed," Jakob said. After getting a confirmation from everyone, he nodded. "Alright, prepare to breach. Daidouji, on my command."

Taiga gripped the handle for the airlock controls as everyone readied their weapons.

"Now," Jakob ordered.

Taiga twisted the handle clockwise until it clicked. The massive armored door to the port engine compartment slid open with a hiss and Vanguard swung into the reactor room. "UNSC, free-" Jakob's warning died in his throat as he slowly lowered his MA5F. He and his team stared at the sight before them.

Wrapped around the massive fusion reactor powering the fusion drive were several glowing tentacles, each one several meters wide. They extended from the exhaust manifolds where the reactor's plasma was supposed to be diverted into the fusion drives and had wrapped themselves several times around the reactor itself. The tentacles pulsed with energy and superheated the metal it was touching, turning it white-hot.

"What in Allah's name is that?" Jakob asked flatly.

"_20,000 Leagues Under the Sea in Space_"

All members of Team Vanguard turned to Tak, the source of the awful joke just now.

"What? I've read Jules Verne before," he explained.

As the other members of the fireteam groaned at the bad joke, Taiga levelled her M45D shotgun at one of the tentacles. "Oh well, time to make some _ikayaki _[2] out of this squid," she said.

Jakob noticed Taiga brace herself against a handhold and point her shotgun. "Wait, hold o-" he began, but it was too late.

Taiga pulled the trigger on her M45D, igniting the 8 gauge shell in the chamber and sending flechettes of tungsten carbide screaming down the barrel and out the muzzle. They flew out in a tight spread pattern like a swarm of angry bees at the glowing tentacle. That

firepower would have made mincemeat out of any organic target. Against the strange creature before them though, they did absolutely nothing.

Well, not exactly nothing. Specifically, they passed through the tentacle and emerged glowing white-hot. The now white-hot flechettes then proceeded to hit various metal parts and ricocheted off them back into the room.

"Get down!" Jakob shouted as he and his team threw themselves behind the closest cover to avoid the ricocheting flechettes whizzing around them.

"_Allah damn dit!_" Jakob cursed in Afrikaans. "Would you learn to think before you shoot?! You almost hit us back here!"

"How the hell was I supposed to know that was going to happen, _baka?!_" Taiga yelled back.

After the flechettes finally stopped bouncing around, Team Vanguard got out from behind cover and looked back at the squid thing.

"Well, the good thing is: now we know projectile weapons won't work on it," Jakob commented.

"So now what?" Taiga asked testily.

"Now we use directed energy weapons, of course," Jakob answered matter-of-factly. "Now where-"

Behind him, Sar braced herself against held up her Type-27 Special Application Scoped Rifle and powered it up with a humming sound. Meanwhile, Tak raised up his Type-65 Directed Energy Rifle/Advanced and grinned as he powered it up as well.

"Okay, you two are up," Jakob announced.

Sar nodded and pointed to the tentacle Taiga had been firing on earlier. "That one," she said to Tak.

"Alright," he answered.

And so, with that said, Sar hooked her feet around a handhold, sighted the reticule from her HUD onto the tentacle, and pulled the trigger of her Type-27 SASR, also known as the Beam Rifle. Like most Covenant weaponry, the trigger of the beam rifle was located in such a way that any human using it had to pull the trigger using their middle finger, and so she did. That one action sent a beam of ionized hydrogen atoms screeching from the muzzle into the tentacle at near-light speed.

At the same time, Tak grabbed another handhold with his clawed feet and pulled the trigger of his Type-65 DER/M, more commonly known as an Assault Repeater. The weapon immediately spat out superheated bolts of plasma, each one screaming as they flew through the air at hypersonic speeds to hit the tentacle Sar was firing at.

The tentacle twitched in responseâ€¦maybe.

As Sar hissed in frustration, Tak raised his weapon slightly, aimed

the Type-58 Underbarrel Grenade Launcher fixed to the underside of the foregrip via rails at the tentacle, and pulled the trigger. The grenade inside shot out with a _fwump_ as it sailed towards the tentacle, glowing with blue light. When it hit the tentacle, the 50mm plasma grenade detonated with a burst of blue fire as the tentacle was engulfed in a miniature sun.

Tak started to grin only it to disappear when the fireball of plasma faded and the tentacle was revealed to be unharmed. Even the residual electricity crackling around the tentacle like arcing lightning didn't seem to faze it at all, though it was twitching visibly now. "Well, I'm out of ideas. Anyone else?" Tak asked sarcastically.

Just then, they heard/felt a heavy thumping. Vanguard Team turned around to see two Mgalekgolo walk into the reactor room on magnetic boots along with several Marines who floated in instead. The Marines stared at the tentacles coiled around Reactor One much like Vanguard Team did while the two Mgalekgolo seemed to be staring at Vanguard Team.

It took a few seconds for Jakob to realize why. "Nogata? Togumi? Is that you guys?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied in unison.

Jakob stared back at the two Mgalekgolo that had wandered off as they headed to the armory and shook his head at the strange coincidence. "Never mind, you guys actually came at the perfect time. Our weapons aren't working on that thing and we need some heavy weapons--"

"Where?" they asked in unison.

Jakob pointed at the tentacle they'd been trying to kill and that was all it took.

One of the Mgalekgolo ('Nogata', Jakob thought) lifted the plasma cannons on its/their right arm and opened fire on the tentacle in question, making the other Marines jump in surprise. Bolts of azure plasma arced out from the cannon and smashed into the tentacle like hammers of actinic fire. This time, there was a reaction from the tentacle. It shuddered. That was it.

Nogata roared in combination fury and frustration as it/they continued to fire on it without much effect as Togumi merely continued to stare at the glowing mass of tentacles. Jakob called to the Marines present to bring something heavier to shoot, then returned to watching Nogata shoot ineffectually at the tentacles. He hoped whatever the Marines brought would work, but he was starting to have his doubts.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** CIC**

Time: (Honor: Please hold off your questions while I am trying to deal with this situation. Thank you for your patience.)

James Cutter watched the feed from the port engine room as he and the other bridge officers watched the security team futilely engaging the

tentacles wrapped around the fusion reactor.

"What the hell is that thing doing in there?" Cutter asked with frustration as he watched another security team bring in one of the new M74 Hellfire plasma cannons into the reactor room.

"**My sensors are showing significantly reduced output in the reactors,**" Honor reported.

"It's probably feeding off the energy," de Medici suggested as she watched the security team finish setting up the plasma cannon and fire it at the tentacles, with predictable results. "It could be it uses those tentacles to suck in energyâ€|no. That has to be it," she said firmly.

"Why do you think that?" Janet Cutter asked as she watched a Marine fire her beam rifle at the tentacle again before holding it to one side as it overheated and its emergency cooling system came online.

De Medici pointed to the creature's main body. "Look at how it was keeping its body from touching the plasma flare from the fusion drives while it just extended its tentacles in like it was nothing. I'm betting that the body is vulnerable to attack."

Whittaker rubbed his chin. "But we've been hitting it with the point-defense guns. The solid, physical rounds pass right through it without seeming to do any damage. The lasers seemed to work, but they weren't causing enough damage, and they were five megawatt lasers. Each."

"Then hit it with something bigger," James Cutter said determinedly. "Honor, prep an Archer for launch," he ordered.

Honor nodded and smiled grimly. "**Aye, sir. Preparing one Archer for launch.**"

"Could we hit it without damaging our own ship in the process?" Whittaker asked worriedly.

"It's either that or we let that thing continue draining and damaging Reactor One and doing God knows what to my ship," Cutter answered grimly.

"**If you need my services, I can always lend a hand,**" Guileless Curiosity offered, making several officers who'd forgotten about the monitor jump in surprise.

Honor's avatar raised an electronic eyebrow. "**And will you be able to lend assistance? Without interfering with my own workload?**"

"**Why, of course!**" Curiosity answered proudly. "**As one of the most advanced ancilla built by my previous owners, I am fully capable of assisting with the calculation without interfering with you. To do otherwise would be shaming the Ecumeme and their legacy. You have my word on that.**"

A corner of Honor's mouth quirked up in a smile. "**Very well then, Curiosity. Your assistance is greatly appreciated. Now let's take

this son of a bitch down so we can be on our way."**

The last sentence was said with a fierce grin that Cutter found to be fairly disturbing on the normally calm, controlled Honor.

"**Yes, ma'am!"** Curiosity shouted happily.

Another few moments passed before,

"**I have one Archer, fully reprogrammed and ready to launch, sir,"** Honor reported.

"**The electromagnetic launcher is fully charged and ready to fire!"** Curiosity reported.

"Launch Archer, and make sure to avoid damaging us if possible," Cutter ordered.

"**Aye, sir," "At once!"** Honor replied and Curiosity shouted before carrying out their orders very, _very_ enthusiastically.

Outside on the _Salamander_'s hull, near the bow, an armored hatch swung open and out popped an M42 Archer anti-ship missile out from its electromagnetic launcher. The missile oriented itself using RCS thrusters before its fusion drive fired up and it shot away ahead of the ship.

James Cutter's finger stabbed the button near his command chair that connected him to the ship's LMC. "All hands, brace for impact!" he ordered.

He watched on the feed from the port engine room as the security team quickly exited and hooked themselves onto various handrails using ropes attached to their armor before turning his attention back to the Archer missile.

Guided by the skilled hands of the flight program the smart AI Honor Harrington and Forerunner ancilla Guileless Curiosity installed into it, the Archer turned its fusion drive off, flipped around using RCS thrusters again, and restarted its fusion drive to kill its velocity and allow the _Salamander_'s forward momentum to bring the space squid into range, aiming right at the thing still clutching the port fusion nozzles. The creature noticed the incoming Archer, but paid it no mind because its energy level was too low. Now it would pay for that.

When the Archer was a few hundred kilometers away, it detonated. The M42 Archer was the latest incarnation of the venerable Archer series of anti-ship missiles. It was armed with a 50 megaton Casaba-Howitzer-type nuclear fusion warhead, which used a case of Titanium-A to channel almost 100% of the 50 megaton yield into a "gun barrel" filled with beryllium oxide. The inert nature and high thermal conductivity of the beryllium oxide accelerated the burn-wave of the explosion, increasing its velocity to 10,000 kilometers per second, or roughly 3% of light-speed. The explosion then slammed into a thin pancake-shaped plate of tungsten. As the tungsten was vaporized by the nuclear explosion, it was stripped of its electrons and converted into a narrow jet of plasma propelled by the energy behind it: essentially a bolt of nuclear fire. The bolt then slammed into a concave chunk of tungsten carbide, converting the chunk into a

long arrow-shaped rod designed to punch through energy shields and armor.

The entire process resulted in the target being hit by an armor-piercing rod followed immediately by a jet of nuclear plasma, which took advantage of the hole created by the penetrator to incinerate the inside of whatever its target is.

Though the penetrator had no effect in this case, sailing right through the squid, the creature still never stood a chance as almost 50 megatons' worth of radioactive plasma washed over its main body, erasing it from existence like the galaxy's most powerful window scraper. It was a testament to Honor's and Curiosity's programming skills that the hull wasn't even scorched in the process, but it was only the Titanium-A5 armor covering every square centimeter of the _Salamander_'s hull, and then some, that kept the crew from being bathed in lethal amounts of radiation. None of the bridge crew were sure which deserved more credit.

As the plasma faded away, the extent of the damage to the creature was revealed. Of the main body, there was nothing left. A few molecules (or whatever it was made of) might have survived, but the crew would have had to scour the area behind them to have been sure. The tentacles were the only parts of the remains left, and the ones on the hull were quickly blown away by the ship's acceleration. The ones still jammed into the fusion drives trailed from the nozzles like grotesque streamers.

Every single one of the bridge officers sighed in relief. "Thank God, it's over," Janet Cutter said.

James Cutter nodded in agreement as he watched the tentacle streamers. "Alright, Honor, Curiosity, continue on our course to the last waypoint. Let's get out of here," he said.

"**Couldn't agree with you more," **Curiosity answered. It brought up a spherical map of the area between itself and Honor. The _Salamander_ was represented as a glowing, oblong shape while the line of waypoints continued ahead and terminated at a blinking blue dot.

"**Ah, there it is!" **Curiosity said cheerfully, bobbing up and down with happiness. "**Those are the coordinates we need to go to head back to Sol's slipspace coordinates!"**

Cheering rang throughout the bridge at the report.

"Finally, some good news!" James Cutter said happily.

Then

"**I'm sorry to interrupt your celebrations, but I have to report that I have finished recalibrating the sensors to compensate for this bizarre pseudo-atmosphere we seem to have found ourselves in. And I'm afraid you won't like the news."**

"What now?" James Cutter asked, exasperated at the seemingly endless string of disasters that had plagued them ever since they stepped foot into this realm.

"**We've a contact coming our way fast, back in the direction from where we had come from."** A dot blinked into existence behind them, closing in on the blinking dot that was their ship. ** "Bringing it up onto the viewscreenâ€|now."**

The dot expanded into view and several groans rang throughout the bridge at the sight of another one of those space squid creature heading right for them. It was flying backwards at them like an Earth squid and it emitted a blue flare from its hollow cavity that didn't seem to affect its tentacles.

"**I'm afraid I have to report that we have a giant squid approaching astern, sir. I'm sure Jules Verne would be quite pleased at this chain of events if he was here,"** Honor reported in a deadpan tone.

"What is that blue glow it's putting out? It looks like aâ€|fusion drive? But it can't be," Whittaker said incredulously.

"Maybe it's capable of naturally producing nuclear fusion reactions?" de Medici wondered.

"Well, whatever it's doing, it's gaining on us," James Cutter said grimly. "Honor, prepare another Archer. Blow that thing to bits."

"**Aye, sir. Preparing another Ar-"**

Then suddenly, the squid changed course. It turned 90 degrees and shot away as fast as it could.

"â€|Okay, what just happened here?" Janet Cutter asked. "Did we scare it off or something?"

"Or maybe something else scared it off," Whittaker said ominously.

Before anyone could respond to that, Honor interrupted in an urgent tone. **"Sir, I have another contact bearing dead off the bow, range: one million, three hundred thousand kilometers. It's huge, sir."**

Huge didn't even begin to describe it. The massive shape that appeared off the edge of the sensor screen had to have been at least thirty times the length of the Salamander. On the sensor screen, it had the appearance of a long snake and it was quickly closing the distance.

"**Increasing magnification on the contact."**

The large snake resolved itself and the contact was revealed. It appeared to be a creature like the squid from earlier, but of a completely different make. This creature had a long and sinuous body like an eel that glowed with a brilliant light. It had no visible eyes or mouth, but it did appear to have long, trailing fins that glowed bright blue. It had a strangely ethereal beauty despite its massive size, or perhaps because of it.

James Cutter's mouth pressed together in a grimace as he stared at

the massive creature heading towards them. "Honor, prep all Archer pods for an alpha strike. Hit it with a full salvo," he ordered.

Honor's lion-like grin reappeared once more. **"Aye, sir."**

All over the *Salamander's* hull, the hatches of 200 Universal Missile Pods—all containing Archers—snapped open, missiles at the ready in their launchers.

"All Archer pods are now charged and ready to fire. Just tell me when."

"Very well then. Fire," Cutter ordered.

At that order, 200 Archer missiles leapt out of their launchers, oriented themselves forward of the ship, and fired their fusion drives. The storm of missiles raced towards at thousands of kilometers per second like a wall of metal. The creature made no move to avoid the incoming storm. Instead, it did something that shocked the officers.

The entire front third of the creature split open to reveal a truly gargantuan maw that gaped open like a black hole and faced the incoming storm of Archers. When the missiles were only a few thousand kilometers away, they detonated as one, sending penetrators and bolts of plasma screaming at the creature. Every single missile hit the target, which didn't even bother to maneuver. That mass of firepower would have wiped out an H-C War-era *CCS*-class battlecruiser had it hit, except this was no battlecruiser. The penetrators passed right through it without harming it, but the lines of plasma hit the creature's open maw—and apparently were absorbed into it.

The entire bridge was shocked at the sight of nearly 10,000 megatons' worth of nuclear plasma disappearing into the creature's gullet. When the storm of plasma faded, not only was the creature unharmed, it looked quite happy. It closed its gigantic mouth and continued heading towards the ship.

"Good God," Whittaker said with awe and fear, expressing the sentiments of the entire bridge crew. "It's like a giant gulper eel," he added quietly.

"Dr. Voroshilov? We need that Hermes Drive of your online, and we need it right this moment," James Cutter ordered.

"Unfortunately, that is not possible, Rear Admiral Cutter. The power fluctuations caused by that squid-like creature's assault has disrupted the charge my Hermes Drive had been building up. It will take another 35 minutes before it reaches full charge again," Dr. Voroshilov reported calmly.

"Pardon my interruption, doctor, but we may not have 35 seconds—let alone 35 minutes, so we would all appreciate it if you could work faster," Honor said coldly.

"Unfortunately, I cannot make my equipment work faster," Dr. Voroshilov replied just as coldly. **"Perhaps you would feel better if you came down here and shouted at it?"**

James Cutter ignored them and looked at the sensor map for any way out of this mess. Then, he noticed one of the storm-like objects nearby and a crazy idea popped into his head. "Honor, get us into the eye of that storm over there," Cutter ordered as he pointed at it on the hologram.

"**Aye, sir. All engines, flank speed," **Honor said as they changed course for the storm. The gigantic contact also adjusted course to chase them.

"Wait, you're not thinking of taking us into there, are you?" Whittaker asked nervously.

"It's better than having that thing, whatever it is, catch us," James Cutter answered.

Nobody answered for a moment. Then Janet Cutter grinned. "Well, if it's down to do or die, I say we go ahead and take action."

De Medici nodded. "Agreed. The captain did manage to get the _Spirit of Fire_ back after all those years more or less in one piece, after all."

Whittaker looked back and forth between the two Lieutenant Commanders and shrugged. "Ah, well. If you two think it's good, I'm in. Let's do this!" he declared.

James Cutter nodded and looked back at the sensor screen to see the rapidly changing distances and swore. They looked like they were going to make it before the creature caught them, but it was going to be close. "Honor, launch a _Shiva_ at that thing. Get it to slow down and give us some breathing room," he ordered.

On the ship's dorsal side, a large hatch opened up and a massive _Shiva_-class heavy anti-ship missile leapt out, oriented itself towards the creature, and fired its own fusion drive to accelerate into incoming creature. It only had to activate its fusion drive for a few seconds before it was within range and it detonated. The _Shiva_ too was equipped with a Casaba-Howitzer warhead like the Archer, but the _Shiva_ mounted a 5 gigaton nuclear fusion warhead 25 meters in diameter instead. The resulting bolt of plasma would have been enough to overload an old _RCS_-class armored cruiser's shields at full power in a single hit. Instead, the creature simply opened its mouth and swallowed the plasma like before.

Fortunately, the _Shiva_'s goal was already achieved. The creature's pause to consume the multi-gigaton banquet laid before it meant that the _Salamander_ was now that much farther from the creature and closer to the storm. The creature seemed to realize this and redoubled its efforts, accelerating even faster to catch its prey.

"It's gaining on us," Whittaker mumbled.

"Pour every joule of power we have into the fusion drives! We have to make it!" James Cutter shouted.

The plume of plasma coming out the fusion drives grew brighter as the warship accelerated right to the limits of its inertial compensators. The faint tug they felt before was now something far more insistent

and stronger. Every member of the crew felt themselves being pulled towards the rear of the ship due to their acceleration.

The creature though, was still gaining. It became a race between predator and prey: the _Salamander_ running as fast as it can towards the storm while the creature ran as fast as it can to catch its meal before it slipped away. As the kilometers slipped away between the two, the creature opened its maw in anticipation of its next meal.

"Everyone, grab hold of something and hang on!" James Cutter shouted into the ship's LMC.

Finally, the race ended. The _Salamander_ passed through the eye of the storm and disappeared in a flash of light. The creature clamped its mouth shut and turned away before it hit the storm. It groaned in frustration and swam away in search of a much slower meal.

The _Salamander_'s troubles were not over yet though. The moment the ship went through the eye, it lost all control and tumbled through a very strange location. The ship appeared to be in a tunnel of some sort, the walls of the tunnel shone with a multi-colored pattern that hurt the eyes to look at.

"What the hell?!" Janet Cutter shouted as the ship tossed and turned every which way.

"I can't keep control!" PO1 Mor screeched as he desperately tried to maintain some kind of heading.

But it was no use. The _Salamander_ tumbled like a fish flushed down a drain.

All along the tunnel walls, strange images flashed through. Some were scenes of wonder:

A galaxy united under the banner of an organization dedicated to maintaining peace and order in the galaxy, with a fleet among the stars to carry that will out.

A massive space station constructed purely for the purpose of maintaining peace among the five races orbited quietly around a distant planet.

A corp of guardians bearing rings of power dedicated to defending the galaxy even against the blackest night shouted their oaths to the stars with raised fists.

Along with the scenes of wonder though, there mixed in were scenes of horror:

A massive battlestation the size of a small moon fired a green beam at an Earth-like planet, obliterating it in a flash.

Several moon-sized creatures descended with tentacles extended and fed upon a helpless Earth amid the screams of billions.

Another Earth ended under countless nuclear fireballs as an orbiting supercomputer laughed in triumph at the destruction of its creators.

The _Salamander_ could have tumbled forever while gazing upon images such as those if not for a small twist of fate.

That twist of fate came in the form of a blue police box spinning along on its merry way with a warning light blinking on its top. The occupant of the police box, not expecting to find anything in its path, failed to notice the _Salamander_ in its way and accidentally rammed into it. Now, you'd think the _Salamander_ would have crushed the police box like a bug against a windshield with its sheer mass but no, that didn't happen. Both objects survived the collision and bounced off on a new trajectory (though later examination of the _Salamander_'s hull would reveal a police box-shaped dent on the starboard bow). The police box quickly corrected its flight path and its occupant was a bit rattled, but otherwise unharmed.

The _Salamander_ wasn't as lucky. The police box's impact knocked it into one of the images on the tunnel wall and as the ship collided with it, it disappeared in a flash of light.

* * *

><p>In another universe, a white portal opened up and a massive bubble still glowing with slipspace radiation tumbled out before the portal snapped shut. As the bubble dissolved and revealed its precious cargo within, the ship, robbed of its velocity by its interdimensional trip, drifted silently among the black void of space; its masts still extended. For all intents and purposes, it was dead to the universe around it.<p>

* * *

><p>London, Britannia, Earth

March 11, 1945

1545 hours

Rosalie de Hemricourt de Grunne's calm expression belied the inner turmoil that even Geena Preddy, who was sitting beside her, could not suppress. The turmoil came partly from the company and partly from the topic they were to discuss.

Sitting at the head of the table Rosalie and Geena were several of the top Allied commanders of the European theater: General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Air Chief Marshall Hugh Dowding, _Generalfeldmarschall_ (Field Marshal) Friedrich Paulus, _GÃ©nÃ©ral de Brigade_ (Brigadier General) Charles de Gaulle, and _Chuujou_ (Lieutenant General) Masaharu Honma. Representing the witches were, of course, Wing Commander Rosalie de Hemricourt de Grunne, Lieutenant Colonel Geena Preddy, and _Generalmajor_ Adolfine Galland. Sitting opposite the witches were several members of the Gallian nobility. Among them were Charles d'Orleans, Jean-Baptiste Philippe, Eugene de Talleyrand-PÃ©rigord, Henri de Lafayette, and Jacques Clostermann.

Their topic for today: the question of whether or not the 506th JFW's A and B-Units will be combined into a single force.

"I would like to call this meeting to order," the calm voice of

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, resounded across the room. He turned to Rosalie and nodded. "Wing Commander de Grunne, you may begin," he spoke.

Rosalie stood up. "Thank you, General Eisenhower. Now if I may begin, I wish to discuss the issue of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing being split into two units and-

"_Je proteste_," came the simple statement from one Eugene de Talleyrand-PÃ©rigord, Prince of Talleyrand. "We have already discussed this topic before and have decided upon it. Why should we continue to debate this and kick the proverbial dead horse?" he reasoned.

Rosalie let no trace of the flare of anger she felt show upon her face as she smiled serenely and answered his question. "While I do realize that we have discussed this topic before, we are not kicking a dead horse, as Talleyrand has so eloquently put it. The horse is, in fact, still very much alive, and kicking back to boot." A round of chuckles echoed around the table. After waiting for them to stop, Rosalie continued. "I would like to present the after-action reports from our last engagement with the Neuroi as Exhibit A," she said as she passed around copies of the report to everyone at the table. "As you can see," Rosalie continued after she's seen that everyone had gotten a copy. "Unit cohesion has suffered greatly since the wing's splitting. Our two units were barely able to perform maneuvers together. Friendly fire became a major issue due to lack of communication. A and B-Units weren't even using the same radio frequencies at the beginning of the engagement: A-Unit was using RAF frequencies, while B-Unit was using USAF frequencies. Based upon these and other incidents, I highly recommend that we immediately combine A and B-Units into a single fighting force."

Many of the members present read through the reports with great interest and much quiet discussion. Several however, namely members of the Gallian aristocracy, simply glanced through it before closing it again. One in particular, Talleyrand, didn't even bother to open it.

"_C'est ridicule!_" cried Jean-Baptiste Philippe, Duke of Burgundy. "Mere commoners cannot be allowed to associate with the nobility!"

"_Je accord_," said Charles d'Orleans, Prince of CondÃ©, with as much scorn as he could possibly put into his voice. "The commoners must not be allowed to infect their betters with their inferiority," he said haughtily.

Rosalie, all the while, fought to keep her anger under control. Though what she really wanted to do at this moment was to step outside, obtain a cricket bat [3], and then step back inside to knock some sense into those "noble" heads. But as that would have been a major breach of social conventions, not to mention an act of assault and battery, she suppressed that urge and maintained her calm exterior.

"I'm sorry, exactly who is inferior here?" Sir Hugh Dowding, 1st Baron Dowding, asked sarcastically.

"Why, the Liberion commoners, of course," said Prince CondÃ©

matter-of-factly, completely missing the sarcasm in Dowding's question.

Eisenhower raised an eyebrow. "Mr. d'Orleans, I am Liberion. Would you mind telling me how I am inferior to you again?" the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force asked in a warning tone.

Prince Condor started to open his mouth, but was cut off by Talleyrand. "Forgive my fellow noble here," he said quickly before Prince Condor could continue stuffing his foot in his mouth. "While he has a rather inelegant way of putting things, he is correct in this case. The nobility will not, cannot, allow commoners to intermingle with fellow nobility in the 506th A-Unit. It would be detrimental and disruptive to their existing unit cohesion," Talleyrand said smoothly.

"I disagree," answered Jacques Clostermann, Duke of Alsace, and coincidentally, father of Perrine Clostermann. "My own daughter served in the 501st Joint Fighter Wing, most of whom were not and have never been nobility, and unit cohesion has never once suffered," he said firmly.

"My own niece is a witch serving with so-called 'commoners' as well," Henri de Lafayette, Marquis de Lafayette, added. "I have never heard of any instances of unit cohesion suffering in my niece's unit as a result of her being there or not."

Rosalie cleared her throat to catch everyone's attention. "I would like to add something as well. I myself have served with many witches, noble and not, and never has unit cohesion ever suffered because of it. I believe that disproves your theory, Prince Talleyrand," she said to him with a smile.

Talleyrand gritted his teeth, but kept his anger from showing on his face. "I think my fellow nobles would disagree on you in this one, Wing Commander. I believe we should leave this to a vote to decide this issue. All in favor of combining the 506th JFW's A and B-Units?" he asked.

A quarter of the nobles raised their hands, among them Clostermann and de Lafayette. Rosalie could feel hope fluttering in her heart.

Talleyrand smiled. "All opposed?" he asked.

Rosalie looked with dismay as almost three-quarters of the nobles present raised their hands, crushing that hope.

"Well, now, it looks like you have your answer, Wing Commander de Grunne," Talleyrand said to her with satisfaction. "You will simply have to find a way to improve their performances without combining them. Good luck, commander," he said with a sibilant tone.

Rosalie clenched her hands and uttered not a word.

* * *

><p>A few minutes laterâ€|

"I'm sorry, Wing Commander de Grunne, that we weren't able to act in favor of your decision," Eisenhower said sadly.

Rosalie shook her head. "It's not your fault, sir. I realize why the Allied command cannot afford to antagonize the nobility. I should be the one to apologize for the behavior of my fellow nobles," Rosalie answered.

Geena reached over and patted Rosalie's head hard. "What have I told you about apologizing for things that aren't your fault? And you have got to stop associating yourself with those bloody idiots, or else people are going to start questioning your intelligence." Then she noticed Clostermann and de Lafayette looking at her with bemused expressions. "Not that I meant any offence towards you two gentlemen. I was just speaking of nobles in general," Geena added quickly.

Clostermann waved it off. "None taken, mademoiselle. I find some of my fellow nobles to be generally lacking in brain matter as well," he said cheerfully.

"To borrow that phrase from Prince Condé, 'Je accord'," de Lafayette added. "If only those buffoons weren't in a position to do some real damage to the reconstruction effort in Gallia if we tried to go against them, we could just, uh, 'steamroll' over them, as you Liberions say," de Lafayette said to Geena.

"Believe me, I'd love to be the one to drive that steamroller, Mr. Lafayette, but since they are in a position to do that damage, we're going to have to improvise. Thankfully, me and Rosalie have got Plan B going," Geena added with a wink.

Adolfine Galland, threw her head back and laughed. "That's the spirit, you two! And while you're working on your Plan B, I'll get my own Plan B going. I've still got some influence with the nobility in Karlsland, and I know a couple of witches with ties to those families too. Between us, we'll get the Karlsland aristocracy to put pressure on the Gallian ones." She grinned. "Hopefully, they'll see the light when our nobles start breathing down their blue necks!" she added.

Rosalie smiled. "Thank you, Generalmajor Galland. We're in your debt."

Adolfine gave her a thumbs-up. "Think nothing of it! Just make sure to keep fighting against those Neuroi with all you got, okay?"

Rosalie and Geena saluted her. "Yes, ma'am!" they shouted in unison.

The group disbanded shortly afterwards to attend to their various duties. As Rosalie and Geena headed out the exit though, a figure stepped in their way. It was Talleyrand.

"Madame de Grunne," he said courteously.

Rosalie stiffened and nodded just as courteously. "Monsieur Talleyrand. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Talleyrand smiled as sickly smile. "Oh, nothing. Just wanted to see what you are going to do now that you can't combine A and B-Units like you wanted." He sneered. "Plan B, feh! What Plan B? That's nothing more than an excuse. You don't actually have anything now, do you?"

Rosalie felt Geena stiffen with anger beside her. She couldn't blame her. She felt the same way. "Is there a point to this, Talleyrand?" Rosalie asked coldly. "Because if there isn't, Geena and I really have to be going. So if you'll excuse, me," she finished as she started to walk past him.

Suddenly, Talleyrand's hand snaked out and grabbed her arm. "Excuse me, but I'm not finished yet," he said.

Rosalie just turned to regard him with frigid eyes. "My, my. Assaulting an officer of the King of Belgica and a chevalier of Gallia? That's quite bold of you. I'd say this will earn you a nice, long stay in prison. Perhaps you should think about that and unhand me," she said coolly as Geena glared at Talleyrand with fiery eyes.

Talleyrand smirked. "Oh, are you sure about that? Because I have a way for you to get everything you want."

Rosalie's eyes narrowed. "Oh, really? And just what do I have to do to obtain this concession pf yours?" she asked suspiciously.

Talleyrand leaned in close to her ear, close enough for Rosalie to feel his hot breath on her earlobes and close enough to smell the putrid breath coming forth from his mouth. "Marry me," he whispered.

Geena was shocked for a moment before her hands clenched into fists from her rage.

As for Rosalie, her eyes widened in shock for a moment, before she mastered her emotions and composure returned to her face. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline your offer, _Monsieur_ Talleyrand. I have no interest in becoming your bride, now or ever. Now, _let go._" Rosalie growled. Her anger was so great, her familiar ears and tail popped out and waves of raw magic power emanated from her body.

Talleyrand released his grip and took a step back as he recoiled in fear. Then a moment later, he managed to recompose himself and his own face was, in turn, wreathed in anger. "So be it, _Madame_ de Grunne. Know this, as long as you continue with your stubbornness, the nobles of Gallia will never allow your wing to reunite!" he snarled and turned to leave. As he stalked back into the building, he turned around and added, "Mark my words, _Madame_ de Grunne. I will have you someday. Just. You. Wait!" he snarled before turning back for the final time and heading back into the building's depths.

For a moment, Rosalie and Geena just stood there in shock and anger.

"Thatâ€¦bastard. That bloody bastard!" Geena snarled as the feathery ears and tail of her own familiar, the Goshawk, popped out.

Rosalie placed her hand on Geena's own. "Calm yourself, Geena. Let's go," she said quietly.

"But-

"_Please._"

Geena then noticed how tightly Rosalie's hand was gripping her own and how it was trembling. The ears and tail of a Bichon Fris , Rosalie's familiar, were still out. The ears were folded back against her head and her tail was curled up under her.

"Let's just go home," Rosalie repeated quietly.

Geena finally nodded and answered her grip with her own. "Yes. Let's," she said.

The two witches walked hand-in-hand out the darkened exit and into the light of the waiting sun.

* * *

><p>Kudos to anyone who can correctly identify the pop-culture references in the interdimensional tunnel.

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: "_Sic itur ad astra_": Latin for "Thus, you shall go to the stars". A quote from the _Aeneid_ by Virgil. The line was spoken by Apollo to the young Ascanius (Iulus according to Virgil) who would grow up to be a great king.

[2]: _ikayaki_: Japanese for grilled squid. Typically served topped with soy sauce. A popular foodstuff at Japanese festivals.

[3]: The average cricket bat is no more than 38 inches long by 4.25 inches wide, weighs between 2 lb 7 oz to 3 lb, and is made of light-weight, but strong, willow-wood. A cricket bat, being heavier than the average baseball bat, would more than suffice as a melee weapon, if a bit fragile. In the hands of Rosalie though, with her magically-enhanced strength and her imbuing the bat with magic, it would have made the task of cracking open skulls quite easy.

5. Chapter 3

A/N: Hey again. Welcome to another chapter of Halo: Contact Neuroi. I hope you'll enjoy this one too.

And once again, please leave a review. No flames, though. They're a little too hot for me.

And thanks to ejhawman for pointing out an error in my story. Thanks a bunch.

* * *

><p>Chapter 3- This is (Not) Earth

****Location: Error. Main power failure. ****

****Date: Error. Main power failure.****

****Time: Error. Main power failure.****

Rear Admiral (Upper Half) James G. Cutter: Status Reportâ€|Warning! Subject is unconscious and injured. Subject exhibits head injuries and symptoms of possible concussion. Dispatching medical team to the bridge.

* * *

><p>"Captain, wake up. Something has happened."_

_James Cutter's eyes snapped open and he quickly began coughing and hacking to clear his lungs. The taste of lime filled his mouth as he coughed up the slimy bronchial surfactant coating his lungs and swallowed it as per regulations. _

"_**Captain, I said 'wake up'. I need you on the bridge,"**__ the voice repeated with a touch of annoyance._

He groaned and rubbed his eyes blearily. The voice sounded familiar, but he could not place it at the moment. 'Where am I?' he wondered as he looked around to see where he was. He saw the tubes and other machinery around him in the small chamber he was in. He noticed the transparent window and looked out to see rows and rows of identical-looking chambers, all with slumbering faces visible through their own windows.

'_I'm in a cryo bay,' he realized._

"_**Captain, you didn't suffer any brain damage while you were in there, did you? You have precious few brain cells as it is. I'd hate for you to lose even a single one,"**__ the voice snarked._

Cutter smiled as he finally realized who the voice belonged to. "Serina, I'm up. Open up the doors already."

"_**Aye, captain, following your much belated orders,"**__ the AI quipped._

The doors of the cryo bay slid open and Cutter stepped out clad only in his black, skin-tight cryo-suit. He stumbled a bit before regaining his balance, his legs a bit weak after so long in hibernation.

'_How long was I out?' he thought blearily as he looked around at his surroundings._

_All around him were rows of cryo-chambers standing against the wall. Each chamber had its occupant's name written on it as well as displaying their vital signs. Cutter's gaze drifted up until he saw the emblem on the wall: a soaring phoenix wreathed in the flames it rose out of; the insignia of the UNSC _Spirit of Fire.

'_Of course! How could I forget I'm back on the _Spirit of Fire?'

Wait.' He suddenly realized the strangeness of his thought just now. 'I'm 'back' on the _Spirit of Fire_? What does that mean? Why does this feel all wro- '_

"_**Captain! What are you waiting for? I need you on the bridge,"
**__Serina said insisently.__

_Cutter shook his head. He could ponder this problem later. Right now, he needed to focus on the problem at hand. "Serina, what happened? Why did you wake me?" he asked.__

"_**My passive sensors have detected three contacts, all unknown, about 9,500,000 kilometers ahead," **__Serina reported.__

_Cutter frowned. Nine million, five-hundred thousand kilometers was at extreme sensor range for the _Spirit._ They were lucky those contacts were detected at all.__

"_Understood. Wake the rest of the crew and sound general quarters. I have a feeling we'll be needing them," Cutter ordered.__

"_**Aye, captain. Giving everyone the alarm clock treatment startingâ€|now."**_

_The GQ alarm blared from all speakers as cryo-chambers started opening all over the bay. Cutter, meanwhile, strode purposefully towards the changing room. _

'_It would be a bit undignified for the crew to see their captain walking around in nothing but his cryo-suit, wouldn't it?' he thought wryly.__

_His good humor vanished when a particular cryo-chamber caught his eye. He stopped and stared for a moment to stare at the empty chamber and the name on it: FORGE, JOHN.__

'_Godammit, Forge. You could never do as you were told, could you? Why couldn't you have come back alive like I'd ordered you to?' Cutter thought bitterly as he recalled how Forge sacrificed himself to save everyone.__

_He finally turned away from the empty chamber, whatever good mood he had thoroughly ruined.__

* * *

><p>A few minutes laterâ€|__

_Standing on the bridge with his officers surrounding him, many still scratching from cryo-itch, Cutter looked at his TACPAD for the time.
_

'_4 minutes, 11 seconds. Not bad. Pretty good actually, considering they just woke up from cryo-sleep,' he thought before putting the little rectangle of hardened plastic and electronics back into his pocket. "Serina, status update on the three contacts," he said.__

"_**No change. Contacts are still holding nine-million, f&2%fg 4 kilometers out andâ€|wait."**_

Cutter frowned at the distortion in Serina's voice, a sign of her growing rampancy, but he had to keep her online to maximize ship performance, so for now he ignored it. "What is it, Serina?"

"_**Contacts have disappeared from sensors andâ€¦shit! Contacts have reappeared just 200,000 kilometers off the bow!"**_

Cutter face turned grim, as did the rest of the bridge crew. Only one power they knew were capable of performing such precise slipspace jumps. Now they just waited for the hammer to drop.

"_**Scanning with radar and lidarâ€¦confirmed."**_ Even Serina sounded grim as she delivered the news. _**"Contacts are three Covenant warships of the class designated **_**CCS**_**-class battlecruiser and they're closing in."**_

_The mood on the bridge turned downright frigid. A single _CCS_-class battlecruiser would have been a nearly impossible fight for the _Spirit_, and that was if they were running at full capacityâ€¦which they weren't, not after getting a portside backrub from a _CPV_-class heavy destroyer that stripped off most of the armor there as well as disabling several of the point-defense weaponry, deck guns, and ATAF missile turrets there too. The broadside exchange afterwards didn't help things. With _three_ to face, it was basically David versus the Goliath tripletsâ€¦and David's slingshot was broken._

Cutter took a deep breath and brought up the ship's LMC. "Men, women, we are about to go to battle against an overwhelming force of Covenant ships. Our chances of survival are slim, but we will do our damn best to bring down at least one of our enemy and show them that humanity will not go down without a fight! And in doing so, it will be at least one ship that the UNSC will not have to face some other day. It's been an honor serving with you all. Godspeed. Cutter out." After turning off the LMC, Cutter turned to his bridge crew. "Prep all remaining weapons," he ordered. "Target the lead ship and-"

_Cutter was cut off by Serina. _**"Captain, I'm getting a transmission from the lead Covenant ship. Looks like they want to talk to us for a change."**_

_The tension in the bridge was replaced by shock and suspicion. Covenant ships have never opened communications with UNSC ships save to mock them. Why would they change their _modus operandi_ now?_

"_**Captain? Do you want to take this call?"**_ Serina asked._

Cutter thought as he pondered this mystery. 'Could they be trying to gather intel on us? Or are they distracting us so they can call for reinforcements? No, that doesn't make sense. They can see the poor state of our ship. There's no need for three battlecruisers to call in reinforcements to take out one half-crippled converted colony ship. So intel then? But if they wanted intel, they'd be boarding us right now instead of calling us. So then what?' He had to make a decision about this now.

"_**Captain?***_

Finally, Cutter decided. "Accept their transmission. Let's see what they want."

"_**Affirmative. Bringing transmission up on the main viewscreen now.**_"

A blinking square on the viewscreen enlarged itself into a view of whoever it was trying to contact them. Cutter's eyes narrowed as he looked at the split-jawed alien on the other end of the transmission. It was one of the Covenant races the UNSC designated "Elites" due to their apparent status and fighting ability. The tall alien was dressed in ornate silver armor with some kind of fur cloak worn over one shoulder.

"_**This is the **_**Fleet of Purposeful Wandering**_** to the unidentified human ship. Your ship appears to be heavily damaged. Do you need a tow to the nearest shipyard?**_" the Elite asked._

Of all the things Cutter expected the Elite to say, the last thing he expected was for it to offer to tow his ship to the nearest base!

The rest of the bridge was equally stunned.

"_The hell?! What are you trying to pull?!" one of the bridge officers shouted._

_The Elite on the screen blinked in confusion. More confused muttering could be heard in the background. _**"I don't think I'm trying to 'pull' anything. I was merely asking if you needed a tow,**_" it said._

At this, Cutter lost his temper. "Listen here, you. Your Covenant came to Harvest, attacked without warning, and took no prisoners. Since then, you've been fighting the exact same way. What makes you think after all that, you can say something like that out of the black and expect us to answer?!"

_The Elite looked both guilty and confused at Cutter's words. Then it muttered, _**"A **_**Phoenix**_**-class colony ship. Could it be?" **_and understanding dawned on its face. _**"Shipmaster, your ship would not happen to be the **_**Spirit of Fire**_**, would it?"**_

If Cutter thought he couldn't be more shocked, this proved him wrong. "How the hell do you know the name of my ship?" he asked the Elite incredulously.

_The Elite bared his fangs in what Cutter assumed was a grin. _**"Better to ask who **_**doesn't **_**know the UNSC **_**Spirit of Fire**_**, Shipmaster Cutter. Every UNSC, ROKN, and ISA ship had been given the description and name of your vessel in case we ever happened to run across you. And it's just so happens that my ship was the one to find you after all these years.**_"

'_After all these years.' Those words echoed through Cutter's mind as he turned to Serina. "Serina, exactly what is the date right now?" he asked with a slight quiver in his voice._

"_**By my count, today is December 1, 2569, Captain,**"__ the AI answered calmly._

_Cutter suddenly felt an urge to sit down. '2569. 38 years since we escaped that strange artificial world. What the hell happened in all that time?' he wondered. Then he realized that there was a source of information right in front of him, figuratively and literally considering that the three _CCS_-class battlecruisers were now clearly visible from the bridge's bow window. He turned once more to the Elite on the viewscreen. _

"_I don't expect you to tell me anything, but what happened in the years we were gone? And what's the state of the war?" he asked the Elite. The bridge crew were shocked that he was asking the Elite for that info, but they had faith in their commander that he was doing the right thing, so they kept silent._

_The Elite nodded. __**"To begin, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Artos 'Talass. I am Shipmaster of the RSN**_** Dance of Eternity**_** and Fleetmaster of the **_**Fleet of Purposeful Wandering, **_**of which the**_** Dance of Eternity **_**serves as flagship, under the Royal Astronomical Survey Corps of the Royal Sanghelios Navy.**_****"

_Cutter looked to his officers, who shrugged in turn. He then sighed and turned back to 'Talass. _

"_I can't say I'm pleased to meet you Shipmasterâ€|Talass, was it?" When 'Talass nodded and said __**"Close enough,"**__ Cutter continued. "But I suppose it would be impolite to not introduce myself as well. I am James Gregory Cutter, Captain of the UNSC _Spirit of Fire_, part of Battlegroup D under Third Fleet commanded by Admiral Cole. Now that we've introduced ourselves, why don't you tell me something? What is the state of the war between humanity and your Covenant?"_

'_Talass took a moment before answering. __**"The war between our peoples is over. It has been over for 16 years."**__ Cutter started to open his mouth, but 'Talass held up a two-fingered, two-thumbed hand for silence. __**"Before you ask, the UNSC was victorious. By a slim margin, yes, but victorious nonetheless." **_

A few bridge officers began to cheer before Cutter silenced them with a look. "And I suppose we are supposed to just take your word on this?" Cutter asked sarcastically.

'_Talass shrugged. __**"I suppose you wouldn't, not from me or any other Sangheili at least."**_

'_So that's what the Elites call themselves,' Cutter filed away as he nodded in response._

"_**Very well, then. Would you believe the war is over if a UNSC ship told you that instead?"**__ 'Talass asked._

Cutter was stunned for the third time in less than 30 minutes. "I suppose I would," Cutter said as he started to wonder if maybe the Elite was telling the truth.

'_Talass nodded. __**"Very well, then."**__ 'Talass turned to the side and said something in its own harsh, guttural language to someone offscreen. A reply came in the form of a high-pitched yipping, barking language that Cutter recognized as being that of the covenant race designated "Grunt" by the UNSC. After a few more exchanges, 'Talass turned back to the screen. __**"It is done. My communications officer has sent a slipspace communications packet to the nearest UNSC world informing them that you've been found and where to find you. It will take some time for them to respond though, and since you will likely not allow us to tow you, we have a long wait ahead of us before a UNSC ship gets here." **__'Talass sat back against his command chair. __**"And since we do, perhaps you can tell us the story of what happened after Arcadia?" **__

Cutter stiffened both from the memories of what happened on Arcadia and from the fact that the Elite wanted information.

_Seeing Cutter's discomfort,__'Talass quickly added, __**"You are free to leave out any portions you feel are classified or you simply do not wish to tell. It is just that our records only go up to the Prophet of Regret saying he had discovered something important and that he or the previous Arbiter would report back later. When he finally did report back, he said he was mistaken and would not speak any more of it. Since then, the question of what really happened during that time and what happened to Ripa 'Moramee as well has remained a mystery. Not that anyone actually cared about that **_**korta [1] **_**of a Sangheili who thought he was a Jiralhanae, but because we are curious as to what manner of fate befell him. So."**__ 'Talass leaned forward slightly. __**"How did 'Moramee die, if he did die?"**_

Cutter closed his eyes and thought about everything that'd happened after leaving Arcadia and their arrival at that strange world infested by those horrific creatures and that fleet of ancient ships piercing the clouds like metallic pillars and its final destruction when they overloaded that artificial sun. He then opened his eyes and looked at the Elite still waiting for his answer. Several other Elites had gathered to hear the story as well as a Grunt.

"_Alright then, I'll tell you," Cutter answered. He sat down on a chair. "What happened was-"_

Suddenly, he felt that strange feeling that this had happened before again, only this time it was much stronger. So strong, that he had to hold his head due to the pain. In the back of his mind, he remembered that feeling was called "dÃ©jÃ vu", but his conscious mind was too busy trying to process the pain.

"â€|_tain!"_

'_Who is that? Why does that voice sound so familiar? Wait, Angelina?' Cutter thought. _

"â€|_amps!"_

'_Janet? But who's Janet? Wait, now I remember. She's my granddaughter.'_

"â€|_ipper! Pull yourselfâ€|ether already!"_

'_Andrew? Wait, where are they? Where are their voices coming from?'

_

_The scene around him suddenly faded to black and before him, two doors appeared. _

_One was rectangular and metallic and looked exactly like the entrance to the _Salamander_'s CIC. It even had the red star above it which denoted to approaching crewmen that this was indeed the bridge if they didn't catch the word "BRIDGE" underneath the star. _

_The other was also rectangular and metallic, but had a slightly worn look to it. The sign above said "CRYO BAY". Cutter recognized it as the entrance to the _Spirit of Fire_'s cryo bay._

'_Hell, no! Who do you think I am?' he thought as he placed his hand on the console next to the "BRIDGE" door._

The door slid open and Cutter was bathed in white light.

* * *

><p>Cutter's eyes snapped open for what he felt like the second time. He quickly noticed two things. The first thing was that his head hurt, a lot. Specifically, his forehead. The second was that someone was shining a bright light into his eyes which made them hurt as well. Not as much as his head, but still plenty enough.<p>

"Glad ta see you're back in the world of the living, aren't ya?" a gruff voice asked with a faint tinge of a Scottish accent.

Cutter held up a hand to block the light from the halogen penlight being shone into his eyes. "Yes, I'm awake. So will you get that damn light out of my eyes already, MacTaggart?" Cutter said as he used his other hand to push the penlight aside, revealing the scowling face of Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman Bruce MacTaggart, the highest ranking corpsman on the _Salamander_.

"Bagh! He's alright. Just spray some biofoam on that cut a' yours on ya forehead and you'll be right as rain!" Which he proceeded to do exactly that.

While MacTaggart was applying the biofoam, a red-headed, freckled face popped into view.

"Hey, gramps, you feeling okay now?" Janet Cutter asked with concern.

James Cutter ignored the stinging sensation of the biofoam being applied to the wound on his forehead and answered, "Yes, I'm fine." Then he noticed that Janet's face was bathed in the dull red glow of emergency lighting. "What's the ship's status?" he called out as MacTaggart stepped back and Cutter brought his chair back up into an upright position.

De Medici turned around and Cutter noticed that she had a faint bruise around her left eye. "Well, for starters, the main power is out, as I'm sure you've noticed. I've got Senior Engineman Lane and her damage control teams working on bringing the reactors back online. Other than that, we can't determine the extent of the ship's

damage until main power is restored," she reported crisply.

James Cutter nodded in approval at her taking command while he was out. "What happened? How did I get knocked out?" Cutter asked while unconsciously feeling the hardened biofoam on his forehead. The last thing he remembered was the _Salamander_ entering that tunnel, those strange images, then something hitting the ship and something flying at his face before everything went black.

There was an embarrassed cough and everyone turned to look at Petty Officer Czherny, who was conspicuously missing the thick pair of military-issue glasses he usually wore. He snapped to attention and saluted. "Sir, it was my fault! I'd failed to properly secure my glasses and when whatever it was hit us, my glasses flew off and smacked into your head and then it bounced off your head into Lieutenant Commander de Medici's face, so please forgive me!" He'd said this in a one breathless explanation and sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

Cutter raised a hand. "It's okay, no one was hurt badly this time. Just make sure you secure your glasses _properly_ next time," he added sternly.

Petty Officer Czherny looked relieved, very relieved. "Thank you, sir!" he shouted.

Cutter nodded and said, "Good. Now retrieve your glasses and stand by at your station until the main power comes back online."

Czherny stiffened and flushed red in the face. "Uh actually, sir. I can't find them. Does anybody see where it went?"

"Ya mean these?" MacTaggart asked sarcastically as he held up a pair of the thick, goggle-like glasses issued as standard equipment to all personnel with vision problems. Despite the abuse it suffered, the lenses and frame appeared to be undamaged and the only thing wrong with it was the undone strap MacTaggart held it by. The Senior Chief Corpsman walked over and shoved it into Czherny's hands. "Here, ya ninny. Try not ta lose it this time!" he said gruffly before storming out the bridge, muttering something about green petty officers.

"Uh, thanks?" Czherny said with a confused look to thin air as he put his glasses back on and made doubly sure that the strap as securely tightened.

Cutter breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, now that that's over with, we just have to wait for Lane to restore main power. Wonder how long that will take?"

Just as Cutter finished his sentence, the red lights flickered back into white and the various consoles came back online. The holotank at the center of the bridge came back online as well.

"**Finally, sir,**" Honor said as she reappeared above the holotank. "**I was beginning to think that damage control was sleeping on the job.**"

Cutter nodded at the AI. "It's good to see you too, Honor. Can you give us a status report on the ship's condition?" he asked.

"**Just a moment.**" Honor performed a thorough systems check while bringing up a complete holographic representation of the _Salamander_ next to him. All this took a mere fraction of a second for the advanced (whatever else he may have seemed) AI. "**Systems check complete. Do you want me to start with the most serious problems or the least, sir?"** the AI asked.

"Start with the most serious and move down."

"**First on the list, the port engine room isâ€¦toast. According to Chief Engineman Lane's report, the reactor there is little more than a half, functioning piece of molten metal and polymer after the, ah, space squid came knocking. That last burst of speed you ordered was apparently the last straw for them after the beating it took. It was a miracle that it lasted that long in the first place. Lane says that it looks like we'll need to replace them completely at the nearest yard.**"

Cutter's expression was grim. The _Salamander_ needed at least three reactors online to accelerate at maximum thrust. With one of their three reactors damaged beyond repair, they now at best were capable of two-thirds their maximum speed assuming no other damage had been sustained to their other drives. They'd be fighting with a lame warship. "Continue," Cutter said grimly.

"**Also, speaking of the reactors, the other fusion drives are down too. The port drive nozzles taken some damage from that space squid's tentacles and will need some repairs. The starboard and spinal drive are also down. It looks like the effort of running at maximum power by themselves have caused them to burn out. We'll need to get to a yard to repair them.**"

Cutter winced internally, but didn't regret his decision to run the drives at maximum power. If they hadn't, that huge creature might have gotten them before they'd reached that storm.

"**Next, several of the Bastion laser clusters are down. Again, that space squid smashed them when it looked like they were hurting it. Also, a few of the Fortresses and one of the Onagers** aren't responding. I think they're down too, but we'll have to send EVA technicians to confirm the damage because a large portion of the ship's external video cameras are out too. The rest of the weapons appear to either have been fortunate enough to be undamaged or have sustained only minimal damage.**"

Then, a horrible realization came to Cutter. "Honor, where are we, by the way? How far are we from the nearest UNSC world" he asked.

Honor frowned as she contemplated the problem. "**Hold on, I am scanning local star systemsâ€¦comparing with existing astrogation chartsâ€¦confirmed. I am 72.6% certain we are in the Sol system. Specifically, we appear to be somewhere between Earth and Mars, though we are to be closer to Earth than to Mars.**"

Cheers broke out in the bridge as they heard the news that they'd actually arrived at their destination despite all that'd happened to them.

Even Cutter cracked a smile, though the relatively low percentage given by Honor didn't escape his notice. "Why are you only 72.6% sure

we're in the Sol system?"

Honor's frown deepened in concentration. **"I'm not really sure. Some of the nearby star systems seemed to be in different positions compared to what is on the astrogation charts, but that could be due to data corruption."**

Cutter nodded. It was a logical guess, and made far more sense than the alternative: that the stars had moved.

'Now that would be preposterous,' Cutter thought. "How are communications? Can we still transmit?" he asked out loud.

"Long-range communications are undamaged, and all short-range comms are functioning within acceptable parameters," Honor reported.

Cutter breathed a sigh of relief. "Excellent." He turned to Czherny. "I guess this is your time to redeem yourself Petty Officer Czherny. Contact EARTHCOR and tell them to send a tug to tow us to the nearest shipyard for repairs. I have a feeling we're going to be in the yards for a long, long while."

Czherny nodded enthusiastically at being offered a second chance and at the thought of getting a long shore leave. "Aye, sir!" He then dialed the ship's radio frequency to FLEETCOM 7, the frequency used by the UNSC Navy. "This is UNSC Salamander to Earth Command. We have sustained severe damage and are requesting a tow to the nearest available shipyard, over." He closed the transmission and waited for EARTHCOR's response.

And waited.

And waited some more.

And waited still.

"Hey, why isn't anyone answering?" Janet Cutter asked nervously.

An icy feeling of foreboding crept up James Cutter's spine. "Petty Officer Czherny, repeat that transmission," he ordered.

"Aye, sir," Czherny answered nervously. He pressed the transmit button again. "I repeat, this is UNSC Salamander to Earth Command. We have sustained severe damage and are unable to travel under our own power. Requesting a tow to the nearest shipyard for immediate repairs, over." He let go of the transmit button again and again he waited for EARTHCOR to respond.

He was in for a long wait.

Yet the signal did not go unheard.

* * *

><p>506**th**** JFW A-Unit Base, Sedan, Gallia, Earth****

****March 11, 1945****

****1600 hours****

Heinrike and Jennifer both suddenly stood up and stiffened as their magic antennae activated and their familiars popped out, both of their own accord.

The other witches noticed their odd behavior.

"Jen-chan, Major Wittgenstein, what's wrong?" Kunika asked them.

"I'mâ€|not sure," Jennifer answered hesitantly.

Heinrike concentrated hard on what was disturbing their magic antennae. "I thinkâ€|it sounds likeâ€|someone is trying to say something," she finally said.

"Say something?" Kunika asked. "Like what?"

Jennifer tuned her magic radar to try and get a lock on the signal. "I can't tell. The message is set to a weird frequency and it's kind of faint, like it's being broadcast from pretty far away. Also, there's this weird distortion that's messing with the signal. It's making it hard to hear," she complained.

"_Nein._ That's not it," Heinrike said distractedly as she adjusted her own magic radar as well. "It's more like the distortion is part of the signal. Hold on." She concentrated as she poured more magic into her antennae and suddenly, "I can hear them!" she shouted triumphantly.

"What are they saying?" Adriana asked due to no small amount of curiosity.

Heinrike didn't say anything for a moment, then, "I repeat, this is UNSC _Salamander_ to Earth Command. We have sustained severe damage and are unable to travel under our own power. Requesting a tow to the nearest available shipyard for immediate repairs, over," she repeated word for word.

The witches were mystified by this message.

"UNSC _Salamander_," Marian repeated to herself. "It sounds like the name of a ship, but I've never heard of the prefix 'UNSC' before."

"And what's 'Earth Command'?" Isaac asked. "I don't think we had an Earth Command, unless the higher-ups did so without telling us."

"No, we definitely don't have an 'Earth Command'," Adriana answered. "I really don't know what whoever this UNSC _Salamander_ is talking about."

"It sounds like an SOS. Maybe we should respond?" Kunika asked.

"I'd love to know how you plan on accomplishing that," Marian said sarcastically.

None of the girls knew how to answer that.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** CIC**

Date: Unknown.

**Time: Unknown. **

Silence filled the bridge as the response that was supposed to come never came.

"Whatâ€|the hell?" Janet asked quietly.

Cutter's grip on his seat tightened. "Try the other frequencies. Maybe their comms are offline." That excuse sounded pathetic, even to his own ears.

Regardless, Czherny obeyed and switched to a different channel. "This is UNSC _Salamander_ to Earth Orbital Defense Network, respond, over."

Silence.

Czherny switched to yet another channel. "This is UNSC _Salamander_ to Home Fleet, please respond, over."

Silence.

"Any UNSC asset in orbit, respond, over."

Silence.

"Mombasa Tether Station, respond, over."

Silence.

"Lunar Traffic Control, respond, over."

Silence.

With each silence, the good cheer that had dominated the bridge fell deeper into shock, fear, and worry.

"Shut it off," Cutter ordered.

"But-"

"Shut down comms, now," he ordered firmly, cutting off Czherny's protest.

"A-Aye, sir," Czherny answered nervously as he cut off the transmission.

To say the mood in the bridge was now a bit chilly was like saying the ocean was a bit wet.

Cutter sat there with his head down for a while before his gaze snapped back up. "Honor, what's the status of the Clarion drones and

the STARS [2] pods?" he asked.

A fraction of a second passed before Honor answered. **"All report they are ready and operational."**

"Launch a few Clarions and a STARS pod into Earth's orbit and have them scan everything, orbitals and planet surface, and have them relay what they find back to us," he ordered.

"Aye, sir," Honor answered as she got to work.

He then turned to his granddaughter and Whittaker. "Cutter, Whittaker, get your ships ready to launch. Have them take up flanking positions around us so they can cover us with their point-defense networks in case of enemy attack."

They both saluted. "Aye, captain!" they shouted before heading out the bridge on the way to their ships.

Cutter brought up Lane's COM on his console. Moments later, a brown-skinned, dark-haired woman appeared on the display.

"What's up, captain? You need something?" she asked bluntly, as if she were being hassled. Someone shouted something indistinct in the background and Chief Engineman Lavinia Lane turned and shouted, **"No, Osen! Not like that! Gunther, show the man what to do before he blows us all to Kingdom Come!"** She then turned back to the screen. **"Make it snappy, captain, I'm busy minding these rookies here."**

"I need you and your team to get at least the starboard fusion drives back online in the next ten minutes."

Lane's jaw dropped open in shock. **"Ten minutes?! You're kidding me! I need that much and a little more just to see what's wrong with them in the first place!"**

"Then how long do you think you can get them online in?" Cutter asked.

Lane thought for a moment before holding up three fingers. **"Give me thirty minutes and I'll have the starboard engines up and running as long as you don't care how efficient they are."**

"That's fine. As long as they're operational."

Lane grinned a cocky grin. **"It's a deal then!"** She then turned to the side. **"Hey, Osen! Stop trying to hit on Gunther and get back to work, or I'll have your sorry hide for-"** the transmission cut off before Cutter could hear the rest of that colorful hide-tanning.

"Drones and sats are all deployed. Estimated time until arrival to Earth: 19 minutes," Honor reported.

"Excellent, some good news for a change." Cutter looked at his TACPAD for the time. "De Medici, tell all senior officers and senior ISA officers to convene in the conference room in three hours for a briefing. I have a feeling they'll be wanting answers soon," he said with a grimace.

De Medici nodded and began contacting the officers in question.

All this and more went on in the bridge as outside on the hull, two hatches opened up. Out through one, several sleek-looking drones leapt out and out through the other, a boxy-looking missile shot out. All of them angled themselves towards Earth and headed there as fast as their fusion drives could carry them.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Salamander**_** CIC**

Date: Unknown

Time: Synchronizing with local timeâ€|synchronized. Time set at 1635 hours GMT.

"Captain, we finally have the casualty reports since we got here," de Medici reported.

Cutter winced. Engineering had finally gotten the starboard fusion drives online a few minutes ago, albeit at 91% efficiency. The spinal fusion drives were only at 72% capacity though, which meant that the ship was only capable of accelerating and decelerating at about 54% of what it should have been capable of. That being said, it was still better than 0. Right now, they were heading for the far side of Earth's moon, Luna. It was determined to be the ideal location to hide out due to a variety of factors; among which was its proximity to Earth, the fact that that side never faced Earth, and the abundance of Helium-3 on the Moon (which the _Salamander_ needed for fuel).

Cutter had thought things were finally going smoothly for the first time so far, then this happened. "How many did we lose?" Cutter asked quietly.

"We've had a total of 40 casualties since we arrived here. Most of them were incurred when that object, whatever it was, slammed into us. Thankfully, only one was a fatality. We're lucky that we only had just that one," de Medici reported calmly.

Cutter frowned, though he knew de Medici was right. In the grand scheme of things, one person out of 24,000 personnel was a miniscule fraction, yet Cutter couldn't help but think of that person as one more that wouldn't be going home. He knew that attitude was hypocritical since he's sent far more than that to their deaths when he was in command of the _Spirit of Fire_, but he couldn't help feeling that way.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The deceased's name was Lieutenant Polonsky, Jeremy. When that thing, whatever it was, slammed into us in that tunnel, a supply crateâ€"you know, one of those giant crates that measures 5x5x5 meters and weigh about half a ton _empty_â€"broke loose of its restraints and flew into Lieutenant Polonsky. The crate had been carrying 4 tons ofâ€|" She grimaced. "Medical supplies."

Cutter grimaced as well. That was arguably the most ironic death he'd

ever heard of.

"As for the other casualties, the injuries range from a Lieutenant who'd broken his toe on the ceiling to a supply clerk who had her right arm crushed by a falling Mgalekgolo. Many of them will need regen, but they'll be fine."

Cutter sighed in relief. "Thank you."

De Medici nodded and walked away to attend to other duties.

Leaving Cutter to wonder just how many more will be as lucky as those 39 people, and how many more will die before this is over.

* * *

><p>506***th**** JFW A-Unit Base, Sedan,
Gallia**

March 11, 1945

1702 hours

"It's been confirmed. All night witches across Europe we could reach reported they've received this strange radio signal. It's likely there's more, but we'll have to wait for them to report in," Rosalie reported to everyone.

The assembled witches of the 506th nodded in understanding, which included both A-Unit and B-Unit. The Liberion witches were still here under the double pretenses that they needed time to pack their belongings and that it was too late in the evening to do anything worthwhile. It wouldn't last long, but those ruses bought precious time to think up of an alternative plan.

"Have any radio stations reported getting this signal too?" Jennifer asked with a raised hand.

"Radio stations reported they received a strange signal, but it was mostly static and the rest was too distorted to make out," Geena reported. "It seems only night witches can resolve the distortions to get anything useful out of the signal."

"Does Allied Command have any idea what we should do about this strange signal?" Heinrike asked.

Rosalie shook her head. "Unfortunately, Allied Command is as confused as everyone else by the strange transmissions. Their current orders are for everyone to stand by regarding the transmissions until they can figure out what to do."

"So in other words, they want us to twiddle our thumbs while they brainstorm, is that it?" Marian asked in a biting tone.

"Essentially," Rosalie responded.

Adriana leaned back with a sigh. "That's sucks. You know, why don't we go out and investigate ourselves? It will be a lot better than for us to sit here and wait for some old fogeys to tell us what to

do."

"And exactly where do you want us to go to find this 'UNSC _Salamander_', Visconti?" Marian asked sarcastically, making Adriana grimace in embarrassment. "Not to mention it's almost nightfall. Unless you want us to get ambushed by night-flying Neuroi, I suggest you hold off on your little investigation until morning."

Heinrike looked at Jennifer. "Speaking of which. DeBlanc, get yourself ready for night patrol, _schnell!_" she ordered.

Jennifer sighed. Ever since she's been here, she and Heinrike have been going on night patrols together. During that time, Jennifer has discovered that Heinrike lacked a sense of humor and did not tolerate idle conversation on patrols, so the nights for her have been pretty boring. "Yeah, yeah, I'm going, Princess," she responded, accidentally using Heinrike's most popular nickname.

The other members of the 506th winced as a vein bulged on Heinrike's temple at the mention of her most-hated nickname. "Captain DeBlanc, you will refer to me as either Major Wittgenstein or Major. You will cease your referring to me by anything else, nicknames especially. _Verstanden?_" She ground out that last bit in Karslandan.

Jennifer gulped. "Crystal clear," she answered quickly.

"_Gut._ Now march to the hangar, _schnell!_ We have a night patrol to prepare for, so get moving!" she shouted like a drill sergeant.

Jennifer's response was automatic, borne from her weeks of training under the particularly harsh regimens of the USMC. "Ma'am, yes ma'am!" she shouted as she stood up with a salute. She immediately turned around and marched out the door leading to the striker hangar, with Heinrike following closely behind singing a Karslandan marching song and leaving the other members of the 506th behind rather at a loss for words at their leaving.

Kunika was the first to ask in the silence that followed. "So what about us? Did you get them to merge our units together?" she asked Rosalie.

Her grimace told the Fusoan girl everything there was to know. "I'm sorry, Ms. Kunika. I've tried to do everything I could, butâ€¦" she sighed. "We'll need to go to Plan B after all."

Kunika nodded sadly. "So what's Plan B?" she asked.

"Is it to blow those old bastards up?" Adriana suggested. "I could say it was an accident with some ordinance."

"I could freeze them and say it was an accident," Carla suggested. "Though I'd need a lot of concentrated ether and a delivery system to do it."

"I could lie in wait and ambush them," Isaac suggested. "With my sniper rifle and a good vantage point, they'd never see me coming."

Rosalie winced at their suggestion. "Thank you, but all of those

would cause more problems than they'd solve."

"So what's Plan B?" Kunika asked.

Neither Rosalie nor Geena responded.

"Don't tell me you two have nothing," Adriana groaned.

"It's not nothingâ€|not quite," Geena said hesitantly.

"Basically, our plan was to find a remote location somewhere and train together in secret so that we can improve our teamwork without the nobles calling a foul," Rosalie explained.

Everybody digested that plan.

"What remote location? We're in the middle of Europe, for Pete's sakes! It's not like there's a conveniently deserted island for us to hide in," Marian said.

"And therein lies the flaw," Rosalie said tiredly. "We only have the basic outline ready. We don't have anything in detail."

Everyone sighed. Disappointment and despair filled the room like a dark shadow.

Suddenly, Geena interrupted the gloom. "Okay, I think we need to all relax. We've had a busy day and we're all tired."

The witches nodded. They've had to fight off two flights of Neuroi while their commanders were away, both made up of several of the Laros-Kai-class [3]. To say it was tiring was a major understatement.

"So why don't we all go grab some dinner and get some winks in? I'm sure the problem will look much less like the Gordian knot in the morning," Geena said.

The assembled witches shouted their agreement and stormed off to the dining hall for something to fill their empty bellies.

Geena, meanwhile, looked at Rosalie who was just sitting there on the sofa, staring at the table. "Do you really think it will be better in the morning?" Rosalie asked quietly.

Geena's response was to bend down and give Rosalie a kiss on her cheek, startling the blond witch out of her reverie. "Sure I am, love. Trust me on this, everything looks better in the morning. Even Neuroi look more cheerful in the morning," Geena said cheerfully.

A smile slowly crept up on Rosalie's face as she stood up and returned the kiss, this time on the lips. "Heh. I guess so, love. You always did know how to cheer me up, Geena," Rosalie said with some happiness finally in her voice.

Geena grinned. "Maybe tonight, I can cheer you up in certain _other_ ways too," she said sulkily.

Her suggestion made Rosalie break out in giggles. "Oh, you're so naughty!" she managed to get out, still giggling all the while

(though it was near-incomprehensible). It was only after she stopped giggled, which took a minute, that her speech returned to being something like comprehensibility. "Ha, ha, I'd love to, but unfortunately, that meeting gave me even more paperwork to do before I can have any time to relax," she said apologetically.

"No problem. I'll help out," Geena answered casually.

"Uh, but--"

"No buts. My incentive for finishing that pile of papers is the same as yours, so just let me help. Now." Geena opened the door leading to the dining hall. "Shall we adjourn for dinner first, love?"

Rosalie smiled brightly. "That's would definitely be appreciated, Geena."

* * *

><p>Location: behind Luna

UNSC **_Salamander**_** Conference Room**

Date: Unknown

1902 hours

To say the mood in the conference room was gloomy was akin to saying the Sun was a bit dry.

Sitting around the massive holotank that took up the room were the senior UNSC officers, including James Cutter, Angelina de Medici, Avery Johnson, Bruce MacTaggart, Lavinia Lane, and a host of others. Janet Cutter and Andrew Whittaker were also attending using holographic representations of themselves in place of their actual bodies. They were indistinguishable from their real bodies save that the holographic avatars had a golden glow to them.

Several of the top civilian scientists also sat around the holotank, serving as scientific advisors. Among them are Dr. Mikhail Voroshilov, 112 Guileless Curiosity, and his Sentinels; and Dr. Hal Emmerich and his team.

Sitting with them as well were top ISA officers leading the ISA forces assigned to the _Salamander_.

Fieldmaster Faruss 'Vadam, nephew to the great Thel 'Vadam, King of Sanghelios and her colonies, led the contingent from the Kingdom of Sanghelios. He was an elderly member of his race, at some 170 Earth years old, but his mind was still as sharp as it had been when he was in his prime. Sitting next to him was Iril 'Yasum, who served as Special Operations Commander to 'Vadam, led the Special Operations troopers among Vadam's force, and was the highest ranking female Sangheili on board. Both sat peacefully, waiting for the captain to begin.

Fieldmistress Ras Var led the Eayn Confederacy contingent. She was an odd-looking Ruuhtan Kig-Yar, with a black patch over one eye that gave her a piratical look. The night-black clothes she habitually wore in favor of a uniform only served to further enhance that image.

Though young-looking compared to other Kig-Yar, she was a master tactician and had a great reputation among the ISA for ingenuity and unorthodox approaches to combat.

Leading the Unggoy as part of the United Republic of Balaho's contingent was General Yeppey Jibok. The Unggoy was a particularly large member of his species at 5' 10" and had the muscles to match. He had a reputation for stubbornness and ferocity and the Unggoy under his command were widely noted to be excellent NCOs.

Taking up the positions of three seats and sitting on a cushioned litter surrounded by several male servants and female Royal Guards was a Yanme'e Queen named Kiiri'khz Izzez't'kl chii Briiz'khz chii Palamok (her full name had several pheromone components and a few syllables in ultrasound, so was unpronounceable in its entirety by humans and every other ex-Covenant race), the leader and mother to all of the Yanme'e onboard, forming the contingent from the Council of Sisters, rulers of Palamok and her colonies. The Yanme'e Queen, though massive, was young for her kind and had an extremely friendly personality at odds with her appearance (to humans, Sangheili, Kig-Yar, and Unggoy anyway), and was thus well-liked by many of the personnel.

Though the Mgalekegolo and Sbaolekgolo forming the Te contingent sent by the Lekgolo Collective didn't have a leader, as Lekgolo have no concept of rank and its importance, they did select an experienced colony to represent them. A massive Mgalekgolo named Nasutu Osso, a giant even for its kind at over 4.88 meters (16 feet) tall, towered over everyone else and had to stand due to the ship not having a large, or strong, enough chair to support it. Thankfully, it didn't mind. Osso was a tolerant sort and was just as comfortable standing as it was sitting.

Last, but not least, leading the Jiralhanae sent by the relatively young Doisac Federation for their contingent was Special Operations Commander Heraudus Forrhe, effectively serving as War Chieftain for the contingent. His long beard was already white with age and tied into an intricate warrior's braid. That combined with his ornate silver armor clearly indicated his rank and seniority. Part of the Martialism faction that formed after the H-C War, Forrhe valued discipline and control above all else and his troops were noted to be as disciplined as Sangheili.

Though there were quite a few Huragok on board the Salamander, they neglected to send a representative to this meeting. Reason given? They just weren't interested. The Huragok cared only about repairing things and little else. So that was that.

None of them looked particularly happy.

Rear Admiral Cutter stood up and cleared his throat to get everyone's attention, though the mere act of his standing up caused all conversation to cease and heads to turn his way. "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to call this meeting to attention." His voice was loud and clear, though all eyes and assorted sensory organs in the room were already directed at him. "No doubt everyone here has already heard the rumors."

"Yes, there are quite a lot of them. Many self-contradictory," Fieldmaster 'Vadam commented wryly.

"That is why I'd like for you to hurry up, Chur'R-Cutter," Fieldmistress Var said irritably in reasonably good English. "I would like to report something back to my troops before the rumors start spinning out of control."

"Please may Ras assume the state of being patient/calm which is desirable. The Shipmaster will be about to speak so please may Ras be patient/calm?" Queen Palamok chided gently.

The Kig-Yar merely folded her arms and grumbled something about "nosy friends".

The Yanme'e Queen turned back to Cutter. "Please may Shipmaster Cutter continue with explaining/revealing the current situation which is desirable by all." The translation device managed to translate her buzzing, clicking, chirping language into English, or something as close to English as possible.

Cutter cleared his throat again, this time because he really did need to clear his throat. "Thank you. Now, allow me to first present the information collected by the Clarion drones and the STARS micro-satellites. Natsu?"

The holotank they were sitting around glowed and a large hologram of Earth with Luna orbiting around it appeared above it. Several points of light flying around Earth in Medium Earth Orbit marked the Clarion drones, while hundreds of smaller dots flying around at Low Earth Orbit marked the positions of each baseball-sized STARS microsatellite. Besides those though, the space around Earth was conspicuously empty.

"As you can immediately see, all UNSC facilities and vessels in orbit around Earth appear to have vanished. Not destroyed, just vanished. There is no debris or wreckage to indicate that any battle has occurred. In fact, there is absolutely nothing in orbit around Earth, as if we'd never gone into space in the first place. The Lunar colonies appeared to have also suffered the same fate."

Several murmurs sounded around the table. Some of the officers present had family on Luna or even lived on Luna, so they were understandably worried.

"I only wished that was the most disturbing news I have to give you. Unfortunately." His face turned grim. "It gets worse."

The hologram zoomed in until only Earth was present. Every human officer present saw what was wrong with Earth and their faces turned equally grim.

"As you can see, there are far fewer lights on the surface than there should be. Scans of the planet by STARS indicate that Earth appears to be at a much lower population and technology level than when we'd last saw it. Analysis indicates that they are at about WWII level of technology."

No one spoke. No one could speak. It was just too unbelievable. That they had somehow ended up back in WWII? Unthinkable!

"So we have to fight goddamn Nazis now?" Johnson muttered

disbelievingly.

"That's not the end of it. I would like to turn your attention to the North American continent."

As the continent in question was highlighted, every human present gasped in shock.

"What the hell?!" an officer cried.

The entire continent looked as though someone took a knife to it, cut it up, and pasted it back together such that the whole continent looked vaguely like a star, as if it was some sick trickster god's version of a practical joke on the origins of the United Republic of North America.

"As you can see, the North American continent has undergone drastic changes to its geography that cannot be explained by any normal means. In addition, most of Brazil appears to now have an inland sea carved into it along with all of Ecuador, much of Western Asia appears to now be a vast inland sea as well, most of China appears to be gone, there is a now massive crater in western Australia, several of the Pacific islands appear to have moved, and there appears to be a large island a few hundred miles northeast of Papua New Guinea where there wasn't before. The only information we got from intercepted radio broadcasts was that the island is called the Republic of South Sea Island and that it is inhabited by a mixture of English and Japanese-speakers."

Cutter paused to let the assembled officers digest the information.

"In addition to these changes in geography there appear to be large storm systems over Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa."

The large, black swirling clouds were highlighted with blinking outlines.

"We are currently unsure what the cause of the storms is. Our sensors are unable to penetrate the cloud layer for some reason and-"

Suddenly the doors to the conference room slid open and Petty Officer Czherny rushed in. "Sir!" he shouted before he noticed the august company he was keeping and he snapped off a salute. "Sir!" he shouted again, this time more formally.

"At ease, Petty Officer Czherny," Cutter said calmly. "What do you have to report?"

Czherny relaxed, just a bit. "Sir, STARS has picked up a broadcast I think you need to hear." He took his TACPAD and flicked a program from the screen to the holotank.

An audio file immediately began playing.

"**-y fellow Britanni-ans, we have sacrificed much in the face of this war. Countless lives have been lost in Europe and in our own Britannia. But let us not lose heart! Our soldiers fight valiantly alongside the Allied nations in the continent and our witches fight

in the skies and on the ground as the shields and spearheads of our assaults. We shall not rest until the dreaded Neuroi have been driven from Europe once and for allâ€|\"**

No one spoke at first.

"My God, that was Winston Churchill," Whittaker declared incredulously.

"Well, that proves it then. We're officially back in WWII," an officer said mournfully.

"Did he say 'Britannia'?" another officer asked. "Doesn't he mean Britain?"

"And what's a 'witch'?" yet another officer asked. "Is that a codeword for some kind of new Allied weapon?"

"And what the hell is a Newroy?" Janet Cutter asked. "Did the Nazis get another nickname?"

Conversation like these continued loudly until Cutter spoke. "Please be silent," he said firmly.

All conversation abruptly halted.

"Thank you. Now, I believe Dr. Voroshilov has a possible answer for this strange situation we've found ourselves in. Doctor?"

Dr. Voroshilov stood up. "Thank you, Rear Admiral Cutter. First off, is anyone here familiar with the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics?"

No one answered.

"No? Very well, then. The many-worlds interpretation, or MWI, of quantum mechanics asserts the objective reality of the universal waveform and denies the actuality of waveform collapse."

That explanation had pretty much everyone scratching their heads, whether they had heads or not.

"Hey, Scarecrow! Cut the techno-babble and speak in plain English like everyone else! We don't have all day!" Johnson yelled.

Dr. Voroshilov's face twitched as he felt a wave of irritation. "Very well, then. In layman's terms, MWI states that all possible alternative histories and futures are real, each representing an actual world or universe. Basically, the theory states that there is a very largeâ€possibly infiniteâ€number of universes, and that everything that could possibly have happened in our past, but did not, has occurred in the pastâ€or is occurringâ€in some other universe or universes."

Cutter held up a hand to stop Dr. Voroshilov. "Doctor, could you stop beating around the bush and just tell us where we are?" he asked testily.

Dr. Voroshilov sighed this time in exasperation. "Fine. It is highly likely that we have ended up in one of these other universes via that

strange storm-like portal we passed through. In fact, it is a certainty. It is the only way to explain the oddities of this Earth."

There was silence yet again, but this time it was quickly broken by heated discussion.

"We're in what?!"

"You're kidding me!"

"How the hell do we get back?!"

As the conversation descended out of control, Cutter had had enough. He stood up and whistled, loudly. "Calm the hell down!"

Silence immediately returned, with all focus on Cutter.

"Thank you!" He sat back down and turned to Dr. Voroshilov. "So now that we're in another universe, how do we get back to our own universe?"

"It is simple, really. We will need to activate my Hermes Drive once more to reenter interdimensional space and find the portal back to our own universe."

"Was it not your device which brought us here in the first place?"
'Vadam asked.

"That is also why my Hermes Drive is the only method of returning to our own universe."

Cutter thought about it. "If we need to go back to that strange space, we'll have to fight those creatures again. We'll need all systems at 100% to have a chance of winning and that means we need all reactors running." He turned to Lane. "Senior Engineman Lane, how long do we have until Reactor One is back online?"

The Senior Engineman scratched her head as she thought, then held up three fingers. "Three months. That's how long my team and the Huragok said they needed to fix the thing."

Cutter stared at her levelly. "That long?"

Lane nodded. "'Fraid so. A lot of the outer casing was melted together and much of the internal mechanisms were damaged as well. And even after getting back up, it won't be running at 100%. At best, I'd estimate about 50%...and that's optimistic. It'd also be as likely as hell to malfunction and shut back down any time. If it were up to me, I'd much rather replace the whole thing at a shipyard."

Cutter gestured at the hologram of Earth still floating above the holotank. "In case you haven't noticed, we're a little short on shipyards at the moment," he said sarcastically.

Lane grimaced. "Yeah, I got that. I'm just saying, we can get it back online, but it won't be at full power."

Dr. Voroshilov raised a hand for attention. "That brings up another

problem as well. My Hermes Drive consumes a large amount of power. If not enough power is available, the required power will be drained out of the other systems. It will reduce the ship's ability to fight or even maneuver effectively and that could mean our collective deaths when we run into those creatures again."

Silence reigned for a moment as they digested the information.

"What about my ship?" Whittaker asked.

Cutter turned to him, or rather, his hologram. "Explain."

"The _Bamboo Cutter_ has two perfectly working D-He3 fusion reactors. If you take out one of them out, you could replace Reactor One with it. It'll be a bit underpowered, well a lot underpowered really, but it'll be far better than running a MacGyvered reactor waiting to go at any time."

Cutter rubbed his chin as he thought. "That's brilliant actually." He turned back to Lane. "How soon can you make the transfer?"

Lane ran the numbers through her head and grinned. "A few weeks, not even a month really. Have to cut open some of the armor plating and hull to get to it, but it wouldn't be any worse than a yard fix."

Cutter nodded and smiled. "Do it, and make the transfer as soon as you get Reactor One out."

"Actually, using the _Strident_'s D-He3 reactor brings up another problem."

Everyone turned to the one who'd made that statement: Dr. Emmerich.

"Why is that?" Cutter asked.

The hologram of Janet Cutter smacked her forehead. "Of course! Fuel!" she groaned.

Dr. Emmerich nodded. "As I recall, the _Salamander_ only carries helium-3 fuel for its own reactors and the _Stridents_ don't carry much deuterium and helium-3 fuel in their storage tanks, at least not enough to fuel the _Salamander_ as well. We'll need to stock up on both if we want to make any kind of long journey."

Cutter nodded grimly. Helium-3 alone would be hard to get. They'd have to go to one of the gas giants and set up a He-3 mine to extract it from their atmosphere, and that will take a while and use up more fuel to boot. That means they will need a steady supply of deuterium before mounting any expedition to the gas giants.

And they knew exactly where they can ensure a stable supply of deuterium.

"We'll need to set up a heavy water production facility on Earth," de Medici concluded.

Cutter winced. Right now, Earth was a complete unknown. Setting up a heavy water production facility there would be a risky, to say the

least. "We need to find out what the hell's going on down there first," he concluded.

Johnson thumped himself on the chest. "Leave it to my Marines, captain! We'll recon the hell out of Earth. Though, I'd like to suggest a place to start."

"Where?" Cutter asked.

Johnson stood up. "There," he said, pointing at Europe. "Our sensors couldn't penetrate those storm systems, right? If you're looking for something suspicious, I think that's pretty high up on my list of suspicious things here. Let me send down a platoon to scout things out and get the lay of the land. By the time they're finished, they'll even be able to tell you how many blades of grass are under those clouds!"

Despite the joke, Cutter didn't laugh or even smile. Thoughts of the Spirit of Fire entered his mind and he recalled the empty cryo chambers, each one representing a trooper who wouldn't be coming home. John Forge's empty chamber stuck out in particular.

"Is there any way we can get this information other than by direct recon?" Cutter asked.

Johnson thought for a moment. "We could send in a recon drone, but without knowing what's under those clouds, there's a high chance the drone will be detected and our cover'll be blown. Personally, I'd rather not announce ourselves until we can do it on our own terms."

The more Cutter thought about it, the more Johnson's words made sense. Finally, he sighed. "You have permission to send down troops for reconnaissance. Troop deployment is up to you, but you are to avoid contact with the natives. Fire only in self-defense and only if you have no choice. This is not to be a reconnaissance by fire, got it?"

Johnson grinned. "Crystal. And don't worry about my boys and girls. They're Marines, and Marines are notoriously hard to kill!"

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]:

A. A korta was a quadrapedal, herbivorous mammalian animal native to Sanghelios. It stood between 7-8 feet tall and had been described by human observers as "the result of a drunken night between a Triceratops, a porcupine, and a wild boar". It sported two brow horns, two forward-pointing nasal horns between a beak, and an armored frill on its neck; but its most distinctive feature were the long quills covering its body like a fur coat. The longest of these quills were a foot long and each was covered in backward-pointing barbs, making removing them an extremely painful procedure. As if those weren't enough, the korta also had a fierce temper and attacked any non-korta creature in sight that was of the same size or larger. Not only that, Korta bulls attacked each other as well during mating season, ramming their horns together in a bid to win the attention of

the equally as prickly females. This made it one of the most dangerous game for Sangheili to hunt and was highly respected by Sangheili hunters for that. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, Sangheili have been frequently known to say that "the korta is a creature best admired from a distance" and from inside an armored vehicle".

B. An insult used by Sangheili for a short-tempered individual, usually one of their own kind, who lashes out at every slight. Came from the korta animal.

[2]: STARS (Stealth Tactical Aerial Reconnaissance Satellite): a satellite system developed by the UNSC for rapid analysis of a target planet. The system consisted of hundreds of baseball-sized, stealthy micro-satellites deployed by an equally stealthy pod into a planet's low orbit. A STARS system could completely scan the surface of an Earth-sized planet in only one and a half hours. Once carried only by prowlers, STARS was now carried by all UNSC capital ships and has proved time and time again to be a very handy tool in the UNSC's arsenal.

[3]: The _Laros Kai_-class Neuroi were a type of flying Neuroi first encountered during the Fuso Sea Incident and were speculated to be an improvement to the _Laros_-class due to their similar roles. They measured around 10 meters long and were both fast and heavily armored, though they lacked the maneuverability of their smaller cousins. By 1945, the _Laros Kai_ have become the primary air-to-air combat and escort fighter for the Neuroi during the Second Neuroi War, with the original _Laros_ now rarely seen.

6. Chapter 4

A/N: Hi, again! Here's the latest chapter of Halo: Contact Neuroi. There's a bit of content I've added to it that might be considered questionable. I hope any of you who are offended by such content aren't too offended by this.

And as always, please leave a review, at least a sentence. And no flames, please.

* * *

><p>Chapter 4- A Vertical Approach

UNSC **_Tale of the Bamboo Cutter**_** SOEIV Bay Briefing Room**

Date: Unknown. Star chart match failure.

Time: 2005 hours

Jakob sat in the metal folding chair calmly reading an issue of _Guns & Ammo_ on his TACPAD [1]. Technically, it was against regulations to download recreational material onto a TACPAD, but most officers and noncoms ignored this regulation. A standard-issue TACPAD could hold up to 35 terabytes of data after all. Even if several dozen gigabytes were used for "miscellaneous purposes", performance wouldn't be affected at all simply due to the massive amount of space available.

To his right, Taiga was impatiently tapping her foot on the floor in a complex rhythm, faintly annoying Jakob, but he ignored it. Most of Taiga's impatience came from the nature of their orders. About an hour ago, Team Vanguard along with a bunch of other soldiers—including some ISA troops—were ordered to go to one of the hangar bays, get into Pelicans provided there, get off at the destination (which was the UNSC _Tale of the Bamboo Cutter_), and report to the SOEIV [2] Bay's mission briefing room for a briefing (what else?). They'd been waiting for only a few minutes, but Taiga's enthusiasm had by that point quickly turned into impatience when nothing was clearly happening.

Further away, Sar and Tak had gotten into an animate conversation with some black armored Spec-Ops Kig-Yar who'd also been sent there. Jakob had no idea what they were talking about, but it must have been very interesting judging by the amount of energy they were putting into it.

Jakob suddenly heard a soft thud to his left and looked up from reading about some of CryTek's new guns. There, sitting right next to him, was a Spartan, fully clad in MJOLNIR armor. Three more sat next to that one in a line. The Spartan noticed Jakob staring and turned his/her head to him.

"Hey kid, what's up?" the Spartan asked rather cheerfully.

Jakob had no idea what to say. "Uh, do we know each other?"

"Huh? Oh, the helmet!" The Spartan twisted the helmet slightly, the airtight seal hissing as it did, and pulled off his helmet to reveal a Mediterranean face made pale from the constant wearing of the helmet. "Remember me now, kid?"

The faces of the four Spartans sitting with Sgt Maj Johnson before flashed into Jakob's mind.

"You were those four Spartans, weren't you?" Jakob asked.

The Spartan grinned. "You got that right, kid." He jabbed a thumb at himself. "Senior Chief Petty Officer Lucian Straka, Spartan-IV. Callsign: Maverick One. The one sitting next to me is Mira Cherenkov, also a Spartan-IV. Callsign: Maverick Three."

The black-haired woman in question waved cheerfully at Jakob.

"The one next to Mira is Elsa-081, Spartan-V. Callsign: Maverick Two."

Jakob's eyes widened slightly as he stared at the albino woman, who gazed impassively back.

"Finally, the one behind me is Kirito-297, also a Spartan-V. Callsign: Maverick 4."

The black-haired, Asian man just looked at him and gave a slight, very slight, nod. All Jakob could do was nod back.

Jakob had heard about the new Spartan-Vs, yet this is the first time he'd ever seen one. He thought it was pretty cool to meet two of

humanity's newest guardians, but he held back the urge to shower them with questions about their lives. He suspected the whole clone thing wasn't something they liked to talk about.

Lucian stuck out a hand. "I've heard some interesting things about you and your team."

Jakob took that armored hand and shook it. "Lance Corporal Jakob E. Branley, UNSCMC. Callsign: Vanguard One. I'm curious about what these interesting things you've heard about us."

Lucian grinned. "Oh, you know. This and that. The _Heart of Darkness_ and the anti-piracy campaigns in Epsilon Hydrae come to mind."

Jakob grimaced, while Taiga, who'd been listening in, smiled at the memory. Those were some of the most difficult battles Team Vanguard have been through. "Yeah, I'm not really eager to repeat those anytime soon," Jakob said.

Lucian just grinned at him. "Hah! That's great! If you'd said that you _did_ wanted to do them again, I'd have recommended you for a Section 8 [3]."

"Uh, thanks?"

Lucian's response was to laugh at him.

"Ten-hut!"

Everyone in the room quickly straightened up at the sound of Johnson's voice. Out of the corner of his eye, Jakob watched Sar and Tak quickly slide into the seats next to Taiga before returning his attention to the officers entering the front of the room.

He recognized Johnson and Cortez, the grizzled Master Gunnery Sergeant behind him, but not the other two people they entered with.

One of them was definitely a Spartan, judging from the MJOLNIR GEN2 armor he/she wore and his/her towering height. There was a red stripe running down the helmet and across the right chestplate, but other than that, there were no other identifying marks.

The other one was a chestnut brown-haired man with a clean shaven face and warm blue eyes. He also unknown to Jakob, but he recognized the golden oak leaf of a Lieutenant Commander on his UNSC Navy uniform and Jakob wondered what he was doing here until he saw the name "WHITTAKER, A" embroidered on the right side of his uniform.

'_Of course! He's the captain of this ship! No wonder he's here.'_

Jakob mentally facepalmed at his own stupidity as Johnson began speaking.

"Listen up, boys and girls! I know you all have had a very strange day, and I know there are all sorts of rumors flying around as to what really happened. Well let me tell you know, I'm here to put an end to all those rumors!

"According to our local eggheads, we have apparently been sucked into some kind of alternate universe."

Murmurs flew around the room at this revelation.

"Specifically, this universe looks to be Earth during the Second World War."

The murmurs became louder.

"However! There are several weird things about this Earth that're making the top brass worried, and that is why everyone is here."

"Your mission is as follows." Johnson activated the holotank in front of him and a large holographic map of Earth appeared above it. Johnson pointed at a flashing dot in Europe, specifically northern France.

"The UNSC Tale of the Bamboo Cutter is currently on its way to Earth and will take up a LEO position at 300 kilometers. At 0200 hours, you are to insert onto the landing site via SOEIV. The landing site is a clearing just west of the Ardennes forest. The forest cover is as thick as a Jiralhanae's chest hair, so you'll be able to hide from aircraft without too much trouble in there."

"Once you have landed, you are to set up a command post in the forest and then recon the surrounding area. You are not to make contact with the locals. In fact, you are to avoid contact altogether. If you are discovered by locals, you are to break contact and evade pursuit. Do not engage the locals. If the locals engage you, you are to fall back and disengage. Fire only if you have absolutely, positively no choice. If in the event that you are forced to fire upon local forces, you are to shoot to capture. You will be provided with M106 Tactical Training Rounds for that purpose. If you unable to do so, you will eliminate them and burn the bodies. Leave no witnesses. Understood?"

The men, women, and aliens nodded or muttered an affirmative.

"As for intel, what little we got from intercepted radio broadcasts indicated that the Allies here are fighting a force they call the 'Newroy'. Now I don't care if they're New Roys, Old Roys, or even Used Roys. In addition to recon, you are going to find out who or what these Roys are. Got it?"

More affirmatives could be heard, along with some good-natured ribbing directed towards the one person in the room who just happened to be named Roy.

"In addition, a fireteam of Spartans as well as a few squads of ODS and ISA Spec Ops are to head here, under the storm system over Germany, and find out what's under there. Our sensors have been unable to penetrate the cloud layer, and the top brass is itching to know why. And that is where you boys and girls come in!"

The ODSs in the group grinned in response while the ISA Spec Ops did their equivalent. They found it quite pleasant that their skills and experience were being acknowledged. The Spartan fireteam in question

felt the same way.

The red-striped Spartan officer stepped forward. "Maverick Team, you are to conduct a forward reconnaissance ahead of the ODSTs and the Spec Ops. Your task will be to uncover whatever surprises might be waiting. That is all."

All of Team Maverick nodded at the orders.

The Spartan's voice was male, but that was all Jakob was able to tell.

One of the officers in the group raised his hand. "What kind of support will we be getting?"

Johnson grinned brightly. "Ah, that's where this guy comes in."

He gestured to Master Gunnery Sergeant Enrico Cortez next to him and the grizzled old veteran stepped forward.

"For this mission, you will be provided with two DURANDAL suits. Each one will be heavily armed for direct fire and suppression in case things go south. In addition, each DURANDAL will be armed with 81mm Gauss mortars for indirect fire and support should you need it. Next, a Hunter pair has been assigned to this mission and will be similarly equipped as the DURANDALs. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how useful they'll be if things have gone Antarctic."

The people in the room grinned or did their species' equivalent. No one needed to tell them how powerful the strange, colonial aliens were with their heavy weaponry, thick armor, and powerful energy shields to protect them.

"And finally, the Bamboo Cutter will be available for orbital fire support in case things have gone completely FUBAR."

Cortez stepped back to allow Whittaker to explain.

"We've prepared Archers and Rapiers in the tubes in case you want the hammer dropped on some poor, unsuspecting bloke who didn't look up." Whittaker waited a beat before adding, "And yes. We have double-checked to make sure we actually have the planetary strike variants loaded in. I can assure you that a repeat of the Scott Pilgrim Incident [4] will not happen, not while I'm in charge."

Every Marine in the room shuddered at the mention of that incident. None of them wanted to call down the hammer and get an anvil instead.

Johnson stepped back in.

"After completing your mission and learned all there is to know, you are to report back to the drop zone to be extracted by Pelicans."

Jakob scratched his head at this and raised his hand. "But sir, wouldn't that defeat the purpose of a stealth mission?"

Johnson grinned at him. "Yes it would. Fortunately, by that point,

there would be no point in stealth. We'll have every bit of info we need to know and there would be no point in staying quiet. Hell, a Pelican flying through the atmosphere at near hypersonic speeds is about the furthest from quiet as you can get!"

Another officer raised her hand. "Sir, what about the local's AA guns? Do the Pelicans need to worry about them?"

Johnson's grin never left his face. "Hell no! Neither the Allies nor the Axis have anything that can catch a Pelican cruising at Mach 5, nor do they have anything that can shoot it down even if by some miracle they were able to. Hell, even a direct hit from a Flak 88's shells wouldn't penetrate the armor of a D81 H-TC Pelican, and don't get me even started on the energy shields! There's a reason why we call those things a "flying brick" you know, and not just because of its shape. And in the event the Pelicans get attacked while landing, we'll have Broadwords, Longswords, and even Seraphs standing by as a show of force to the locals. Believe me, those Pelicans will get you out, come hell or high water!

Johnson's grin vanished. "One last thing. You are to remember that this is not Earth." There was none of his usual joking tone in this statement. "At least, not the Earth that you know. Do not treat it as such. You are to treat this planet as though it is an alien planet that just happens to have humans on it. Do not anticipate anything. Keep your mind clear and anticipate nothing, and you will be prepared for anything. Crystal?"

"Clear!" the whole room answered.

The grin returned to Johnson's face. "Just remember, we are UNSC Marines, and nothing will stop us. Are we clear?"

"Hoo-ah!"

"I said, 'Are we clear'?"

"HOO-AH!"

Johnson's grin nearly split his face. "Good. Now good luck, stay frosty, and prepare to drop feet-first into God-knows-what."

* * *

><p>506***th**** A-Unit Base, Sedan, Gallia, Earth**

2305 hours

The door swung open and Rosalie stepped into her room and sat down on the edge of her bed. It was spacious, but mostly empty of decorations. The bed was plain white. The nightstand was well-built, but otherwise normal. There was a plain, wooden bookcase filled with alphabetically ordered books of various genres ranging from military history to science fiction to epic fantasy, all with well-worn covers, but was otherwise normal-looking. In fact, the only piece of decoration were a pair of framed black-and-white pictures on the nightstand.

One was a picture they took recently of the entire 506th JFW, both

A-Unit and B-Unit included. The two commanders were sitting in chairs next to each other and smiling. Adriana was standing next to Rosalie had an arm wrapped around an obviously uncomfortable Marian and was flashing a thumbs-up at the camera. Heinrike was standing at parade rest and looked every inch the Karlsland officer she was. Carla was standing next to Geena and had a cocky smile on her face like she was ready to take on any Neuroi that tried to crash this moment. Geena merely had the same expression she always had: a weird combination of disinterest and boredom. Sitting in seiza position, with her legs folded underneath her thighs and hands placed palm-down on her legs, was Kunika with a bright smile on her face. To her left was Jennifer, who was sitting cross-legged and hugging Kunika's arm. To her right was Isaac, who also hugging Kunika's other arm and was trying to imitate Kunika's seiza position, but looked quite uncomfortable doing it. All in all, it had been a most interesting group photo.

The other picture was much older, the edges already turning yellow with age. It showed two girls, both around 10 to 11 years of age, smiling at the camera with their arms wrapped around each other, looking very much like a couple in love. One girl had short, dark hair like a boy's and was dressed in the uniform of the US Army Air Force. The other had long, pale hair that reached down to her hips and wore the uniform of the Belgican Military Aviation.

Rosalie stretched and sighed in fond remembrance at the memories.

Rosalie felt a shift in the bed as Geena sat down next to her.

"Which one are you thinking about?" the Liberion witch asked, leaning against Rosalie as she spoke.

Rosalie smiled at the contact and leaned back. "Both, actually. I was, am, thinking about old memories as well as more recent ones. They are both important to me."

Geena looked over and contemplated the two photos.

Rosalie smiled at her. "Which memories are you fondly reminiscing over?"

The dark-haired Liberion thought for several moments before answering. "It's a shame you cut your hair. It was so long and silky," she said seriously.

Rosalie's laughter rang through like a bell.

Geena merely looked at her with a confused expression. "What?"

Rosalie just chuckled and reached back. She pulled her braid loose and her blonde hair tumbled down her back like a waterfall. It wasn't quite hip-length, but it did go halfway down her back. "It's not that short compared to what it was back then."

Geena gently ran her fingers through that luxurious hair. "Hmm, still feels as silky smooth as it was back in Hispania."

Rosalie's smile disappeared at the mention of Hispania. She remembered the Neuroi incursion there back in July of 1936. She remembered the first Neuroi landings, and the panic it caused as they attacked everything in sight, making no discrimination between military and civilian targets. She remembered being called into service along with many other witches and the European armies mobilizing for combat.

She frowned as she remembered the bungling made by inept commanders as they ordered around their mundane and witch units with no clear idea what to do, and the massive casualties those orders cost. She remembered friends who would forever be absent due to those fools.

Her dreary ruminations ceased abruptly as a finger tickled her armpit.

"Eyaagh!" Rosalie shrieked as she frantically covered that particularly sensitive spot.

Geens made a self-satisfied smile at the pouting Rosalie. "Well, that sure cheered you up now, didn't it?" Seeing Rosalie's still-pouting face, Geena toned down her smile into something gentler. "But seriously, love. You really do have a habit of getting depressed easily."

Rosalie just sighed. "I know, I know. I'm justâ€¦tired, that's all. We've been fighting these Neuroi for almost 6 years now for people who don't seem to want this war to end. Sometimes, I feel like my head is going to explode from the stress of it all."

Geena leaned towards her then and kissed her. "Well, I know an excellent way to get rid of that stress," she said huskily.

Rosalie slowly smiled and returned the kiss. "Oh, and what might that be?" she mumbled coyly. Her face was flushed with heat as the words came out of her mouth.

Their kisses steadily grew more passionate as they started to unbutton their uniforms. Geena managed to finish first, tossing her olive green uniform on the floor and started to unclasp her white bra. As soon as she finished, she leaned forward and whispered in Rosalie's ear, "Trust me. It's something that'll take the stress off both our minds."

* * *

><p>About an hour laterâ€¦

Rosalie sighed with pleasure as she curled up against Geena. "It's been a while since we've done this."

Geena kissed her on the forehead. "8 months, 16 days, and 3 hours since the last time."

Rosalie giggled. "You really have been counting down, have you?"

"Well, it's definitely something to count down to, love."

Rosalie sighed and nuzzled her face against her lover's ample bosom. Then her smile slowly faded from her face. "Am I a hypocrite, Geena?"

Geena sighed in disappointment. "Are you getting depressed already? It hasn't even been 5 minutes since you came and it's already wearing off?"

Rosalie shook her head. "I'm serious, Geena. Is this the sole reason I want to merge our units together? I don't want to do that if my real reason is just to be with you."

Geena sighed and sat up. "Alright, let me make this clear." She raised up an index finger in a lecture pose, which made Rosalite sit up in response. "Your reasons for merging the 506th JFW was made for purely military reasons in that the benefits of splitting the wing between bases so widely spread apart are completely outweighed by the diminishment in teamwork and experience it produces. The fact that I am the commander of B-Unit is insignificant to your stance. Hell, you didn't even know I was going to be appointed the commander of B-Unit until a few months into your command, which up until that point, you'd been constantly fighting against splitting the wing for months." She lowered her finger and tapped it against Rosalie's nose. "Do you get it?"

Rosalie sighed. "I know all that, but stillâ€¦"

Geena leaned forward and hugged her. "Just consider the fact that we love each other to be an instance of prior relationship, completely unrelated to your current decision."

Rosalie just sighed and flopped herself and Geena onto the bed. "Alright," she finished simply. She then noticed Geena's hand wandering down her thigh and smiled. "Oh my, are you feeling up for some more? I'd thought the last hour would have been enough for you."

Geena's hand gently pried Rosalie's legs open and began to stroke that sensitive spot between them, making the blonde girl moan in response. "I think I should be asking you that, love. You've come maybe, what, six times in the last hour?"

Rosalie's response was to lean forward and kiss her lover. "Let's make it seven this time. For me and you." She fondled one of Geena's breasts while she said that.

In the end, it was another twenty or so minutes of pleasure later until they finally fell asleep, holding each other in an embrace that seemed like nothing could ever sunder.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Tale of the Bamboo Cutter**_** SOEIV Bay**

0145 hours

"**Attention all personnel in the SOEIV bay! First wave is scheduled to drop in T-minus 15 minutes. Make final preparations and check your equipment. It would be most troubling for you if you forget something

critical like say, your helmet, while dropping, wouldn't it? So let's perform that final equipment check, shall we?"**

The voices of several people could be heard muttering at the mischievous tone of the ship's AI, Kaguyahime.

Jakob, however, ignored them and went over all the equipment he'd loaded into his command pod hours earlier.

'_Let's see, one MA5F in the left weapon holder. Check. One M6M in the right weapon holder. Check. I have my TACPAD on my left arm and a M571 WMGL on my right arm. The special combat knife dad gave me is in my shoulder holster. My equipment is in my pockets and I've stuffed the rest of the pockets and the drop pod's side panels with as much ammo as I could fit in there, not to mention the ammo I'm carrying. Now what else is there?'

"Hello? Luna to Jakob? Are you going to get in your pod, or what?" Taiga asked, waving a hand in front of his face.

"In a minute. I'm still checking."

Taiga rolled her eyes. "Geez, you've already double-checked everything _twice_. How many more times will it take before you're satisfied?"

"Just another one, Taiga. It never hurts to check again."

Jakob heard Taiga say an incredulous "Uh-huh", but blocked it out so he could recheck everything. He put his helmet back on, which sealed its vacuum seal with a hiss, and got into his SOEIV's seat. One inside, he ran a complete systems check on everything: from the drag chute release system to the retrorockets. It took several minutes, but Jakob became quite pleased when everything came back reading normal. "That's everything," he said, satisfied with his inspection.

"**Attention! First wave is scheduled to drop in T-minus 5 minutes. All commanders are to report to their drop pods and sit tight. All other personnel are to exit the SOEIV bay immediately. Don't worry, you'll see some action soon, **_**ne?***_****"

Jakob breathed out a sigh, distorted by the helmet's filter into something reminiscent of Darth Vader's breathing. "I'm already sitting in here, so that's convenient," he mused.

Taiga turned to Sara and Tak, who'd been watching the past couple of minutes. "Alright, you guys, time to head out. You do not want to be in here when they depressurize the bay."

Sara waved to Jakob. "Good luck!"

Tak just grinned at him. "Have fun dropping down 300,000 meters to the ground"

Jakob just grinned back, even though Tak couldn't see his face behind the helmet. "Oh, I'll have fun. Don't worry about it. This is the moment I've been waiting for since I enlisted." He watched as his team walked off to one of the doors leading out the bay before reaching over and pulling a switch. The drop pod's door slammed down

and sealed itself with a hiss.

Suddenly, Jakob's TACPAD came to life and a figure appeared on the screen. The figure was of a black-haired Asian girl wearing ornate robes of Japanese design, but shrunken down to fit the screen. She was sitting with her legs folded in seiza position and she bowed to Jakob.

"**Hello. I am a sixth-generation, Class III military-grade dumb AI. I am assigned to your command pod and will be assisting you for the duration of this mission. My name is Kohime-1585. It's a pleasure to meet you,"** the dumb AI said politely, but warmly.

"Pleasure to meet you too, Kohime-1585. The name's Jakob Branley. Call me Jakob. I hope we get along on this trip."

The AI bowed her head in agreement. "**I hope that will be the case as well, Jakob-**_**san,**_**" **the AI said with a smile.

Jakob then felt his pod moving. He looked out the window and saw the other pods moving into launch position as well, moving down the tube to their launch positions. Then the SOEIV launch doors below them opened up and Jakob was treated to a wonderful view of the planet below.

Earth hung like a shining jewel below Jakob. The blues of the ocean, the greens and browns of the continents, the whites of the clouds; all contributed to the ethereal beauty of humanity's homeworld. Jakob's eyes narrowed though, when he saw the storm systems Johnson outlined in his briefing. They were swirling black clouds, like hurricanes. The ones in Europe seemed to be made of many smaller storms clustered together, with the sole exception being the one over northern Italy. That single storm was several times larger than the others. Regardless of size however, all of them gave off a faint trace of malevolence. Maybe it was just that their color or their unnatural positions, but Jakob felt the hairs on the back on his neck prick up at the sight of those storms.

"**T-minus 1 minute to drop. All commanders check in."** The sound of Kaguyahime's voice broke Jakob out of his trance.

"**Bravo One, ready."**

"**Tiger One, standing by."**

"**Talon One, ready and waiting,"** the raspy voice of a Kig-Yar answered.

"**Avenger One, ready to jump into hell!"**

"**Nightblade One, awaiting drop orders."** The voice was the deep, guttural one of a Sangheili.

"Vanguard One, I'm all ready here," Jakob said.

"**False-designation Dragonfly One is ready for deployment."** The Yanme'e's clicking, chirping, and buzzing could be heard over the translator.

One by one, the commanders of the fireteams listed themselves off

until the last one finished.

All commanders have reported in. Time is now T-minus 30 seconds to drop. Good luck down there.

An indicator light glowed near the top of Jakob's vision, counting down the seconds until they'd drop into the atmosphere.

It was then that Jakob thought of something. "Hey, Kohime? Can you access my TACPAD and bring up my music collection?"

Yes, I can, the AI said cheerily.

A moment passed before Jakob asked, "So will you?"

Oh, of course! The little AI searched through the files on Jakob's TACPAD for a bit before suddenly looking uncomfortable. ***..._**Ano**_, theseâ€¦ programs are against regulations, aren't it?*** she asked nervously.

Jakob sighed. "It doesn't affect my performance and it takes up negligible data space. There's no reason it should be against regulation. Plus, if you don't mention it to anyone, no one will know. And by the bounds of your programming, you are obligated to follow my orders, aren't you?"

Y-Yes.

He smiled. "Great! So go into my music collection and start playing Track 4 in Sabaton's _Coat of Arms_ album, okay? It'll be the perfect background music for this."

Kohime sighed. ***"Yes, sir.***

The first strains of the song began as the countdown indicator lit up and began beeping for the last 5 seconds before launch.

Crack of the lightning splitting the ground!

Jakob watched the other drop pods shoot out the launch tubes and zoom off below; their rocket thrusters auto-correcting their descent.

Thunder is sounding, artillery is pounding!

The countdown reached zero. Jakob felt the acceleration forces as his own pod was launched by the magnetic coils of the launch tube.

Wrath of the Nazis cast on Bastogne,

Jakob felt himself being pulled by acceleration forces as his drop pod's thrusters shot him away from the ship and down, down into the atmosphere.

Facing the forces alone!

Jakob watched the clouds, darkened by night, slowly push away the blackness of space until the clouds were the only thing visible.

Alone!

'_Well, where we're going, we're not alone,'_ Jakob thought with a smile. _'Not with a whole capital ship looking after us.'_

* * *

><p>Somewhere over northern Gallia

0200 hours

DeBlanc, report in.

Jennifer sighed. Heinrike demanded that she report in regularly every 30 minutes. She understood the necessity of it, but it was still annoying as hell. "Yes, Major Wittgenstein. All clear here. No Neuroi detected."

She could almost see Heinrike giving a quick nod of approval.

****_**Gut.**_** Proceed with your patrol then." **

Jennifer returned her attention to the landscape as the transmission ended, with one eye looking at her magic antennae display and the other scanning the horizon, exactly like they taught her in basic.

'_Always keep one eye glued to the display and the other on reality!'
_Jennifer remembered her drill sergeant, an ex-witch by the name of Sergeant Derringer, say, or rather, shout in her face. _'You don't want to shoot at a Neuroi only to find that it's just a flock of birds! So pay! Attention! To! Your! Surroundings!'_

She still winced from the instructor's words, but she took them to heart. She swept her gaze around, not depending solely on her magic radar and that's when she saw it.

Meteors. Streaking through the sky like stars falling from the black.

"Heinrike, Heinrike!" she called excitedly using her radio.

What is it? A Neuroi attack?!

"What! No! Look up, look up!"

It took a few moments for Heinrike to reply. **"Ah, you mean the**_**meteorregen **_**up there?"**

"If you mean that meteor shower up there, then yeah!"

"â€|**DeBlanc. In the future, use this channel only for military matters. Do not use it for trivial concerns."**

Jennifer stuck her tongue out at Heinrike, even though the Karlslandan witch couldn't see it. "Come on! Don't you have any sense of wonder? When there's a meteor shower in the sky, you should feel happy that you get to witness such an incredible event!"

All she got from Heinrike was silence.

"I heard from Kunika that if you wish on a shooting star when you see it, it'll come true!"

Still silence.

Jennifer pouted. _'Come on! Can't anything get her to stop being a freakin' soldier for a minute?'_

Then she remembered a little fact about Heinrike she just happened to overhear one night and a wicked grin grew on her face. "I bet Heidemarie thinks it's pretty."

For a few moments, Jennifer heard nothing but more silence.
Then:

"**Why do you think I would care about what **_**Major **_**Schnaufer thinks whether some falling debris from space is pretty or not?"
**Heinrike replied in a curiously flat tone.

'_Because you reacted!_' Jennifer thought triumphantly. Out loud, she replied, "Well, why don't we ask Heidemarie for ourselves and find out?"

"**Th-there is no need to-"**

Jennifer cut her out and immediately switched channels to the night witch radio network. "This is Jennifer DeBlanc calling on Night Witch Radio, I'm looking for a, let me see if I got this right, Major Heidemarie Schnaufer. Is she up tonight?"

It was a couple of seconds before someone answered. "**Um, **_**ja**_**, this is her. May I ask why you are calling me?"** The girl's voice was so quiet, it was almost a whisper.

Jennifer grinned. _'Bingo!_' she thought. "Yes, this is Jennifer DeBlanc calling. I'm wondering if you can tell me what you think of the meteor shower that's happening this lovely night."

"**That? Um, well, it's very pretty. There's not that many, but it's still pretty. Though it seems kind of odd that they're all coming from one poi-"**

Jennifer raised a fist in triumph. "And there you have it, folks! Heidemarie Schnaufer thinks this meteor shower is short, but sweet, and I'm inclined to think so myself. Now let's turn our attention to one Heinrike Prinzessin zu Sayn-Wittgenstein! Boy, what a mouthful! What do you think of that comment, Princess?"

Jennifer could almost see Heinrike fidgeting as she thought of what to say. "**Iâ€|suppose they are somewhat pleasant to gaze upon as well."**

"And there you have it, folks! Heinrike agrees with Heidemarie! Don't you see the lovely symmetry between these two? Isn't it precious?"

"_Hauptmann_," Heinrike said in a tone flatter than the surface of a calm sea, yet still roiling with the force of the ocean currents below. "You will cease and desist with this at once, or I

will-

***Um, I think it's nice that like watching the night sky as well,
Major**** Wittgenstein,"** Heidemarie said quietly.

Several moments of silence passed. Jennifer could almost imagine Heinrike's mouth opening and closing like a fish as she tried to come up with a response to that.

***I uh, that isâ€¦nice as well, **_**Major **_**Schnaufer,"
Heinrike finally answered. *"Perhaps if, uh, I have time, I can allow you to accompany me to watch the night skyâ€¦for threats, of course."**

"â€¦**Oh," **was Heidemarie's reply.

You do not care for it? Heinrike said worriedly. ***"Then perhaps another activity would suffice-***

***Oh, no. That's not what I meant,"** Heidemarie replied hurriedly.
***"It's justâ€¦it's the first time anyone has invited me out to do anything."**

'â€¦_Wow. That was so sad, I can't even bring myself to crack a joke at it,'_ Jennifer thought.

Apparently, Heinrike thought the same way, because it took her a few moments to reply. ***"Well, you can be certain that if anyone knows how to make someone's first time memorable, it is I, Heinrike Prinzessin zu Sayn-Witgenstein!"**

"â€¦**Thank you, **_**Major **_**Wittgenstein. I'll be looking forward to it," **Heidemarie replied warmly before signing off.

It was a few moments after Heidemarie signed off that Jennifer made her move. "So, you're going to make her first time _memorable_, eh?" she quipped to Heinrike.

***Ah, perhaps."** Heinrike's tone was dreamy, as though she were floating on Cloud 9.

'_Huh. I didn't expect strait-laced Heinrike to be _that_ forward.'_

***Maybe I can persuade Visconti to cook a dish for me to share with
Major**** Schnaufer. Oh, and a telescope. Star charts too."**

"Don't forget the lubricant," Jennifer added.

***Lubricant? Why would I need that?" **Before Jennifer could answer, Heinrike shouted, ***"Of course! For the telescope. In case the mechanism becomes stuck. Excellent thinking, DeBlanc."**

Jennifer sighed. "Seriously? That's the first thing you come up with? I guess I should've expected that from you."

"â€¦**I don't understand."**

"I mean, who comes up with that as their first answer? I swear,

you're going to be hopeless when you're doing _that_ with her."

"**Doing what? What is this 'that' you are going on about?***"

"By the gods, you are dense when it comes to this! You know, at this rate, when she's naked in front of you and begging for you to take her, you'll be asking her where she wants to be taken to."

It was another few moments before Heinrike responded to that.
"DeBlanc."

"What?"

It was then that Jennifer realized too late that Heinrike's voice wasn't coming over the radio. With a gulp, she turned around to see Heinrike hovering in front of her with an absolutely empty look on her face, devoid of all emotion. Pity included.

"Do you know what the meaning of 'corporal punishment' is?" Heinrike asked.

"Uhâ€¦maybe?"

Quick as a viper's strike, Heinrike's hands reached out, grabbed hold of Jennifer's cheeks, and pulled in opposite directions. Hard.

"You. Will. Not. Ever. Speak. Of. My. Relationship. With. Major. Schnaufer. In. That. Manner. Again. _Verstanden?_" Each word was emphasized with a hard yank.

"Bim sbowwy!" Jennifer wailed, trying to apologize.

So busy were they with their little fun, that none of them noticed the "meteors" behaving a littleâ€¦odd.

* * *

><p>About 5000 meters above northern France, travelling at about 6.5 kms**

0202 hours

"Popping chutes!" Jakob yelled as he quickly punched the appropriate button.

The button activated several explosive bolts in the upper section of the drop pod. Four panels separated from the pod and opened like a metal flower. The petals were immediately dragged out and flew from the pod until it was abruptly stopped by a thick cable of braided carbon nanotubes attached to the center of the petals and connecting with the pod. At the same time, retrorockets near the bottom of the pod fired to further counteract the pod's descent.

Jakob immediately felt the pod begin to slow down, as evidenced by his stomach's contents pressing against the top of said stomach. A quick glance at the altimeter that doubled as a speedometer told him that his SOEIV was now travelling at about 1.5 km/s and was 1000 meters above the ground. It wasn't going to be enough. By the time he hit the ground, Jakob estimated he'd still be travelling at just

under 1 km/s; more than enough to go splat and make a neat crater in the process. The being known as Jakob would have been reduced to dust on the wind.

Fortunately, he didn't have to suffer that fate.

At 50 meters, the parachute cable detached with a snapping bang of explosive bolts and the last set of retrorockets fired. This particular set was nicknamed "The Mule" by ODST, for obvious reasons. The retrorockets produced enough thrust to slow the SOEIV down from about 1 km/s to less than 100 m/s in the span of 50 meters, about the force produced by a small aircraft bomb. The resulting forces acting on the occupant inside wasâ€|intense. Had it not been for the pod's small, but powerful inertial compensators, his seat's restraints, and his own suit's shock absorbers, Jakob would have ended up quite dead. Not quite a red smear, but still dead.

As it was, it was the most intense jolt Jakob had ever had the displeasure to experience aside from training. So intense was it, that Jakob barely even noticed the impact of the pod landing.

Despite the drag chute and the retrorockets, the SOEIV was still travelling at about 90 m/s when it hit the ground, sending up a shower of dirt and vegetation. It was well within the pod's tolerances though, considering that it was designed to survive impact with bedrock at over 300 m/s.

Jakob, meanwhile, sat in a daze as he tried to recover from the gut-wrenching experience delivered by "The Mule".

"**Jakob-**_**san**_**, are you functional? It has been T-plus 7 seconds after landing! You need to get out and coordinate your fireteam's landings!"** Kohime-1585 said frantically.

Jakob blinked several times to clear the dizziness. "Yeah, alright. I'm up. I'm good."

He reached out with his right hand and fumbled around until it found a latch. He gave a quarter-turn left and pulled. There was a hiss of air as the vacuum seal, which had miraculously remained intact despite all that had been done to the pod, released. Then several bangs were heard as explosive bolts blew and the door shot off into the distance and crashed into a sapling, smashing it to pieces. Jakob winced at his accidental herbicide as the restraints which had secured him to the seat sprang back up and he hopped out the pod, grabbing his MA5F on the way out.

As soon as he touched the ground, Jakob scanned the area and activated his GRAM suit's camoskin with a subvocalized command. Thousands of photoreactive panels on the suit's surface immediately went to work, changing the camouflage pattern to match the surrounding environment. The panels also have the ability to quickly adjust their coloration as the user moved from one environment to another. It wasn't perfect though. The user was simply hard to make out against the background, not invisible; but it used very little power compared to some of the suit's more advanced stealth systems currently equipped and so was perfect to use as a default stealth feature.

"Kohime, use the pod's sensors and scan the surrounding area for anyone around. I don't want any surprises," he said quietly.

After a few moments, Kohime reported, ****"There are no humans or human-sized organisms within the pod's sensor range. There is a small herd of deer about 800 meters away, but they appear running from the impacts of the SOEIVs and are no threat to anyone here."****

Jakob nodded and deactivated his stealth systems, reverting the suit's skin back to its preset mottled green forest camouflage.

"This is Vanguard One to Overwatch," he radioed to the heavy frigate in orbit. "I've made planetfall. Could you send down my team already?"

****Roger that. We're preparing to send down second wave. Stand by.****

He then proceeded to salvage his equipment from his pod, first pulling his BR105 from its holder and placing it on the Geckopad [5] holder on his back, then retrieving the ammo from the various storage areas on the pod.

It was just as he'd stuffed the last magazine into a pocket that the Bamboo Cutter reported back. ****"Second wave launched. Stand by to direct landings."****

"This is Vanguard One, copy that." He ended the transmission and changed the channel to his team's frequency. He leaned back against his drop pod and waited for them to clear the atmosphere.

He didn't have to wait long.

The telltale meteor storm pattern of the drop pods entering the atmosphere appeared in the night sky, all seeming to radiate from a single point Jakob knew was the Bamboo Cutter. The white streaks the SOEIV's made as they plunged into the atmosphere looked just like falling stars.

After a few moments, Jakob lifted his TACPAD up. "Vanguard One to Vanguard Team. How are you guys holding up?"

****How do you think we're holding up, **_**baka?*_** **Taiga** shouted angrily.

****This fun!**** Sar shouted happily.

****Next time, I'll take a Pelican. Perhaps a Phantom. The ride's smoother.**** Tak didn't shout. He sounded too queasy for that.

Jakob grinned. "Sounds like you're doing alright! Just keep doing what you're doing and remember to land near my position."

Calls of affirmative came from his team as he watched the black dots quickly plunge into view; his VISR adjusting for the low light conditions and the distance. As the pods drew closer and closer to the ground, Jakob made sure he stood with a wide stance and held a hand over his head. Considering that the pods would be travelling at

about 90 m/s when they hit the ground, the impact will-

Boom, boom, boom!

The three SOEIVs containing his team members thudded to the ground several meters around him, sending dirt and grass flying up and then dropping down on him like rain, with the metal drag chutes thudding to the ground moments later, adding to the debris flying through the air.

After a couple of seconds, the pods' doors blew open with the sound of explosive bolts detonating as with his own, and his team hit the ground moments later. They quickly saw Jakob standing there, waving his free arm at them and after gathering their weapons and ammo, they headed over to his position.

Sar reached him first, quickly scanning the area for threats before turning her attention to her fireteam leader. Jakob saw that she was carrying a BR105HB-SR battle rifle instead of her favorite Type-27 beam rifle. The big rifle had a bipod and telescopic sight equipped for long-range shooting, though the holographic sight mounted on top of the scope meant that it could be used in close quarters just as effectively. She carried two sidearms in a pair of hip holsters: one was a Type-25 plasma pistol and the other was an Eayn-manufactured Type-53 laser pistol. Both were Sar's personal possessions. In fact, much of her equipment were her personal possessions. Even the point-defense gauntlet on her left arm, the energy dagger on her right, and the toolkit on her waist were her possessions. Jakob could only shake his head at how much dangerous stuff she owned and turned his attention to the next person to arrive.

Taiga was rubbing her shoulders, but otherwise looked ready for action if the way she held her M739B Squad Automatic Weapon was any indication. Hanging from a quick-release strap by her right hip was a M45E pump action shotgun, with a sawn-off barrel and stockless pistol grip for better handling in CQC situations. Extending from her back at an angle where it could be easily pulled from its sheathe was one of the most unusual weapons she wielded: a monomolecular sword [6], this one made in the shape of a Japanese katana. It was an unusual choice of weapon, but it was one she knew how to use, as combat footage from Taiga's VISR could attest to. Finally, she rounded out her armament with a pair of M571 Wrist-Mounted Grenade Launchers on each arm. Jakob noted that the 25mm grenade launchers seemed like overkill, but would come in handy before turning his attention to the last member of his team.

Tak was, unusually, the last one to arrive. He looked a little unsteady on his feet as he walked up to Jakob and he looked like he was actively trying not to vomit.

"You okay there, man?" Jakob asked.

The T'vaoan Kig-Yar shook his head for a moment to clear his mind. "I will be fine. Just let me walk it off, as you humans say."

Jakob nodded and took a look at Tak's weapons instead. In his hands, he carried a BR105 battle rifle like Sar's, save that the scope was much shorter and more suited for fast, mid-range shooting than long-range sniping. Rounding out his own armament was a Needler tucked into a hip holster to serve as a sidearm. Jakob also knew that

Tak carried a point-defense gauntlet on his left arm and a smaller point-defense bracer on his right. The bracer produced a smaller shield than the gauntlet, but it since it used the same power cell, the bracer was able to produce a much more powerful shield; several times more powerful to be exact.

"Alright, we're all here." Jakob began. "Now we head to the gathering point in there." He pointed into the depths of the Ardennes forest in the distance. "Move carefully, but quickly. We don't want to get caught in the open by an air patrol. That would beâ€|awkward."

"No kidding." Taiga pumped her shotgun a little to check the chamber before pushing the pump back into place. "Come on, let's cut the chit-chat and get moving," she said before walking towards the forest.

The three remaining members of Team Vanguard looked at each other, shrugged, and followed Taiga. Just as they reached the edge of the trees though, Jakob called for them to halt.

"What for?" Taiga asked.

Jakob merely held up his TACPAD. He typed in a command on it and pressed the "enter" key, sending the command to the four SOEIVs sitting in their mini-craters out in the clearing.

A fraction of a second later, too little for anyone but an AI to tell, the SOEIV pods erupted in light and flames as their built-in C-12 charges detonated. Each one exploded with about the force of a 50 kg bomb and sent out scything arcs of shrapnel in all directions that would have been quite lethal had there been anyone within range.

"Well, that wraps it up. Now we can get moving," Jakob said.

Taiga mumbled something incoherent.

"What was that?" Jakob asked.

"Taiga say she want to press button next time," Sar answered. Then a moment later, "Now she say my ears too good."

* * *

><p>As it turned out, navigating the forest was trickier than it looked. The terrain varied constantly and the trees were thick enough to block what little light came from the crescent moon above. The members of Team Vanguard had to adjust their VISRs to see in the extremely low-light conditions and everything was a varying tone of gray due to the VISRs being unable to display color from the lack of light. The grayed-out forest looked unnatural and menacing to the team and put them on edge.<p>

The roots extending from the trees and threatening to trip them with every step weren't exactly helpful either.

"_Kuso!_" Taiga cursed quietly as she nearly tripped on an arched root. "What's with all these roots?"

"Well this _is_ a forest, after all," Tak quipped.

"_Damare. _That means 'shut up' if you didn't get it." Taiga muttered quietly after that as she continued negotiating the forest floor. A branch smacked into her faceplate, and that was when she lost her temper, pulling out her moly-sword and slashing the offending branch into toothpicks; small ones, perhaps big enough for mice.

Jakob looked on with semi-amusement as he concentrated on navigating the thick forest. "So what about you two?" he asked Sar and Tak to either side of him. "How are you guys doing?"

"Good," Sar said simply as she made her way through the tangle of roots with surprising speed.

"If you think this is bad, you should visit Eayn." Tak nimbly stepped on a root and hopped over to the next.

"That bad?" Jakob asked. He tried to imitate Tak, but lost his balance as he misjudged his leap and landed awkwardly on a root.

"Worse." Tak held out a three-fingered hand and steadied Jakob, preventing him from making a painful, but mostly embarrassing fall. "Let's just say that if you step outside a trail, your foot will be swallowed by the vegetation of the undergrowth. Assuming something else doesn't swallow it first, of course." He added that last bit with a grin of bared fangs to himself, since nobody else could see it through the helmet.

"Huh." Jakob stepped down from the root and proceeded to just make his way through normally.

"It's not all like that though. The cities are very nice. The capital city, Sach'ra, in particular is pleasantly warm and humid."

"Uh-huh," Jakob said unconvincingly. "Yeah, I don't think my idea of pleasant is a rainforest. I might make a visit there someday, but I'm pretty sure tropical temperatures and humidity from constant rainfall does not fit into my idea of comfortable."

Any further conversation was cut off as Taiga suddenly yelped and there was a solid-sounding thud from ahead.

"Shit." Jakob immediately increased his speed and made his way to her. "Taiga, you okay?"

Taiga suddenly got up and brushed some dirt off. "_Ite_...yeah, I'm okay. I just tripped on a root, that's all."

Sar hopped up onto a nearby root and looked at what tripped Taiga over. "That not root," she said.

"Huh?" Taiga turned around and looked down. "Hey, you're right." She picked up the object and held it up for everyone to see.

"Looks like an autocannon," Jakob said as he examined the large, black weapon with an equally large drum magazine affixed to the side. "About 20mm in bore, from the looks of it. It looks like it has seen some action too. Look at the scorch marks, and that receiver." He

pointed out the details he was talking about. "It looks like the ammo cooked off in the chamber and blew it out. I guess that's why someone threw it away here."

"Threw it away?" Taiga repeated incredulously as she hefted the massive weapon up and down. "Hell, who'd be able to lift it high enough to throw it? I don't remember in my Earth History class anyone ever saying the Allies had Spartans on their side."

"No, they didn't. And look, this thing has a pistol grip and trigger just so someone could use it like a rifle. But like you said, only a Spartan could possibly wield this thing. If a regular human were to fire this thing, it would dislocate their shoulders. Which begs the question as to who the hell would possibly be able to use this?"

Neither Jakob nor Taiga said anything. They couldn't imagine any answer that would make sense. Then,

"Nazi?" Sar asked.

Both Jakob and Taiga just stared at her.

"Do you even know what a Nazi is?" Jakob asked.

Sar nodded slowly. "I think. Nazi are funny-talking people that salute lots and they go 'Hire hitter', yes?"

Jakob and Taiga first looked at each other and then back to Sar. "That'sâ€¦not quite what they're about. They're a lot moreâ€¦menacing than that."

"But I see in Tak's game that what they are."

Both Jakob and Taiga turned to the Kig-Yar, who shrugged in a very human gesture of confusion.

"I had once played a 'video game' called 'Wolfenstein 3D'," his lipless, Kig-Yar mouth made a hash of the pronunciation. "A friend gave me it as a gift, saying it was an educational game designed to teach human children about that ancient war you fought called 'World War Two'. Though now that I think about it, it was likely a prank. I hardly believe that these Nazis could have genetically altered soldiers, soldiers that could dual-wield rotary cannons, and a mechanized combat harness for this Hitler person these Nazis seem so obsessed with."

"No, they don't," Jakob said as he facepalmed. "When this is all over, we need to have a long chat with you two about Earth history. The real Earth history, not this prehistoric pop culture claptrap you found."

Before the conversation could go further, a voice said,

"Thunder."

Jakob's head snapped up to where the voice had come from, but he could see nothing. Whoever it was, was hiding in the branches. The voice sounded synthesized, like it had come from a

translator.

Regardless, Jakob recognized the code-phrase they'd agreed upon to recognize allied forces not aligned to the UNSC, specifically the ISA forces. "Flash," he responded.

Suddenly, loud buzzing like that of a bee's, but multiplied to a much greater degree, could be heard and several large, beetle-like creatures flew down into their midst, startling the members of Team Vanguard: Yanme'e.

As the insectoid aliens folded their double pair of transparent veined wings back under their hard elytra, one of the larger Yanme'e walked up to Jakob on folded back tarsi. Though the night-vision mode of Jakob's VISR couldn't make out what color the Yanme'e's shells were, they appeared to all be darkened with some kind of paint and the antigravity units on each elytron were painted over as well to hide their soft glows. This Yanme'e had long, forked horns on its "forehead", and a pair of feathery antennae twitched on her head in Jakob's direction.

"May this soldier offer/extend greetings to the allied human military flight which would be polite," the Yanme'e said as she stared at Jakob with its three pairs of compound eyes. The sound of her clicking, buzzing, and chirping could be heard in the background underneath the synthesized speech of the translator.

Jakob raised a hand in greeting. "Uh, hello to you too. I'm Lance Corporal Branley of Fireteam Vanguard, callsign Vanguard One."

The Yanme'e's antennae continued twitching in Jakob's direction, but that was the only physical response Jakob could tell she did. Suddenly, she said, "The military wing that this soldier commands/directs is called Stealth Recon Lance-21. May [previous reference] offer/extend greetings to military flight called 'Vanguard' which this soldier may have difficulty speaking."

Jakob had to keep himself from wincing. The Yanme'e's butchering of "Vanguard" was far, far worse than Tak's butchering of "Wolfenstein 3D". It sounded to Jakob like the Yanme'e had said "Vnn'kh'kt".

"No, its fine," he lied. "So your squad," he counted off the number Yanme'e present. Twelve Yanme'e. Definitely a squad. "Is called Stealth Recon Lance-21. What about you? What's your name?" Jakob asked.

"Name?" The Yanme'e seemed confused by the word, or perhaps her translator malfunctioned.

"Yeah, name. You know, the title others call you by?"

The Yanme'e twitched her antennae and tilted her head at Jakob before answering, "This soldier has been given the designation Tzzz'kh't-79 by the Queen-Mother for which this soldier is grateful/overjoyed to have been given and is of the rank of Ultra of which this soldier of proud to have attained/earned and has been given the false-designation Dragonfly One for this mission."

Jakob rubbed the armored chin of his helmet as he tried to figure out how to pronounce that incomprehensible name. Then he gave up when he

realized that the name likely wasn't complete anyway and that he'd never be able to pronounce the ultrasonic and pheromone components.

"Okay nice to meet you, Ultra Tizzkit't. Is that close enough for you?" When the Yanme'e didn't respond save for more antennae twitching, he continued. "So what brings yourâ€|wing here? I'm guessing it's not for a courtesy call."

"Allied human commander's guess is correct. This soldier's wing has been ordered to search out any UNSC and ISA units in this place of many trees which may be straggling and bring [previous reference] to base camp which has been set up and the military swarm commanders which has [previous reference] commanded this military wing to perform."

Jakob managed to work his understanding through that long, convoluted, rambling speech. "So you're here to get us to HQ, right?"

The Yanme'e Ultra known as Tzzz'kh't-79 merely twitched her antennae wildly in response. "That is what this soldier has been saying which you now repeat which has been repeated."

Jakob wasn't entirely sure, but the Yanme'e sounded annoyed. "Okay, then. How about you guys lead the way and we'll follow?"

Tzzz'kh't-79 clacked her mandibles together. "Then please do so which would be desirable." She clicked and buzzed at her lance and they opened their wings and began heading away, making short, fluttering hops that covered several meters with each jump.

Jakob and his team had started to follow them when the sound of droning began to fill the air.

"What, more Yanme'e?" Taiga asked wearily.

"That sound is not the sound of Yanme'e wings which would be incorrect for it is too regular/constant which Yanme'e wings are not," Tzzz'kh't said.

Jakob realized it first. "Shit, prop aircraft! Everyone get down!" he hissed.

Everyone, including the Yanme'e, got into prone position or found overhead cover as the drone of propellers powered by primitive reciprocating gas engines got louder and louder. Some of the soldiers present tried to see where the aircraft were, but the thick cover of the treetops prevented them from seeing much of anything. All anyone saw were a pair of dark shapes flitting by overhead. Eventually, the droning became less loud as the aircraft moved away and eventually faded altogether. It was only then that everyone got up.

"Air patrols. Definitely not good for our chances if we get caught out in the open," Tak commented.

"Well, it was a good thing we're in a forest, then," Jakob responded. "Come on, let's get moving before they decide to swing back."

* * *

><p>Somewhere above Ardennes Forest

0248 hours

Jennifer alternated between glancing nervously down at the forested country below and glancing nervously to where Heinrike was flying a little ahead of her. Just a couple of minutes ago, Heinrike had caught Jennifer and had been busy pulling on Jennifer's cheeks as punishment when they'd heard the muffled _boom_s in the distance. Heinrike then abandoned their argument and merely told Jennifer to stay at her six before flying off in the direction of the explosions.

Now they were flying over the Ardennes forest and they still hadn't found the source of the explosions. Worse, Jennifer was worried of maybe she went too far with that joke, because Heinrike hasn't spoken a word to her during the whole trip.

Not to scold, not to report info, nothing. It was as if Heinrike had turned into a statue. A flying one, to be sure, but still a statue.

"Um, Heinrike?" Jennifer asked hesitantly. "You're not still mad at me for that little thing I did earlier, are you?" She laughed nervously.

"_Hauptmann_, do not speak to me unless you have information to report, that is all." The sentence was spoken with the flat tones of a Karlsland officer to a subordinate he/she did not like.

Jennifer made a little whine deep in her throat and returned her gaze to the Ardennes as they continued onwards towards their unknown destination and whatever may lay there.

They didn't have long to wait. Just a minute later, they reached a strange scene:

All over the ground for miles around, laid blackened craters. All of them were of a strangely uniform size and all appeared to be spread out over the area right next to the Ardennes forest.

"Huh, so they were meteors?" Jennifer asked curiously as she flew lower to examine one of the craters. "I guess we were worried about nothing?"

"_Nein._" Heinrike answered firmly as she herself picked up a blackened piece of something unidentifiable. "No meteor has a delayed explosion, and look at their sizes and where they landed." Her hand swept out as if to encompass the craters in their entirety. "What kind of meteors come in all the same size and are apparently capable of landing in a narrow arc that completely misses the forest?" She shook her head. "_Nein._ There's something strange happening."

Jennifer nodded slowly. It made sense, but it still didn't explain what happened. "So what? If it isn't meteors, thenâ€¦" She trailed off as she realized with horror dawning on her face what the only other possibility that made sense was. "You don't think it's another

Neuroi landing, do you?" the Hispanian-Liberion witch asked nervously.

Heinrike looked around at the craters. "I don't know. If it were, it couldn't have been very large, or else HQ's radar station would have noticed and notified us." She flew in a slow circle as she thought. "And even if it were Neuroi, it begs the question of why didn't the impact destroy them?" More circling. Then she snapped out of her apparent trance. "Regardless, if more Neuroi have landed, we have to search them out and destroy them."

Jennifer nodded. That was one thing she and Heinrike agreed on without hesitation. She immediately began looking around to see where the Neuroi might have gone to since they were clearly not here when she remembered the incredibly thick Ardennes forest she and Heinrike flew over. She smacked herself on the forehead. "Of course! How could I have been so stupid?"

Jennifer noticed Heinrike giving her an odd look and she quickly explained. "The Neuroi couldn't have gotten far, _si?_"

Heinrike nodded slowly.

"But since we haven't seen hide nor hair of them, they must've found some place to hide, _si?_"

Another slow nod from Heinrike, who's still not quite sure what Jennifer is leading up to.

"Well, what have we been flying over for the past couple of miles?"

Heinrike's eyes widened as she realized what she was talking about and her gaze snapped to the sea of green (well grayish-green due to the low-light conditions) that made up the Ardennes Forest. "We have to conduct a sweep of the forest," the Karlslandan witch concluded.

"Should we call in some ground-pounders to help with the search?" Jennifer asked.

Heinrike nodded. "_Ja,_ please do. We can't search the whole area from the air. The trees are too thick."

Jennifer nodded. She reached up to activate her throat-mike when she suddenly felt something thump against her side. She reached over and felt something wet before she suddenly felt very tired and sleepy. The last sight she saw before everything went black was Heinrike tipping over as well.

* * *

><p>Somewhere on the western edge of the Ardennes Forest

0255 hours

The blue-haired, blue eyed ODST sniper gazed at the two targets through her silenced rifle's Oracle N572 scope as they fell to the ground a few meters below. She, her partner, and their spotters had

been listening in to the two targets' conversation using shotgun microphones and when she'd heard that the targets were going to call in ground patrols, she deemed them to be hazardous to the operation and had taken the shot, her partner doing the same.

Of course, it wasn't with actual bullets. They'd used TTRs to knock them unconscious. The training rounds were loaded with a red paint composed of a drug called Hyberzine. The stuff was a cocktail of anesthetics and other pharmaceuticals designed to quickly put the human body in a hibernation state, all regulated by nanites to ensure that neither overdose nor underdose occurred. This made Hyberzine one of the safest methods to immobilize recruits and people they wanted alive.

Still, the sniper felt a slight pang of sympathy as she watched the two targets hit the ground, crumpling like dolls. From the view she had of their faces with her Oracle scope, they seemed young, too young to know what it meant to be in a life-or-death situation.

Yet they were also carrying weapons. That automatically made them combatants in the sniper's mind. And just as they had a mission and orders to follow, so too did the sniper follow her own orders and mission parameters.

Not only that, but the animal ears and tails sticking out of the base of their spines were downright strange. At first, the sniper thought they were part of some sort of costume the targets were wearing like the cosplayers she saw in Akihabara, but then she saw the ears and tails retract into them as they fell unconscious and it was then she knew those weren't costumes.

'_What the hell were those, anyways? Those couldn't have been part of any human. What kind of weird place did we land on? Johnson was right. This is most definitely _not _Earth.'_

The sniper quickly shook off those thoughts. She had a mission to complete. "All units. Targets are down. Move in to capture. We'll provide overwatch from here," the sniper radioed to the waiting troops.

"**Roger that. Keep us covered.**"

Upon saying that, two teams of troops: one a fireteam of UNSC Marines, the other a file of Sangheili Spec Ops, broke cover and moved towards the downed figures in the distance. Their weapons swept back and forth as they advanced, searching for any threat that may appear, until the two teams had reached the downed figures.

"**This is Charlie One, we've reached the targets.**"

"**Nighthunter One here, no other enemies sighted. Proceeding with capture.**"

A few seconds pass by.

"**Okay, what the hell? Are these kids?**"

"**Teenagers from the looks of it.**"

"**What are these weird machines on their legs?**"

Don't know. Are they attached?

Can't tell. Should I remove them?

Yes. Just do it carefully.

Roger thatâ€¦okay, they're coming off smoothly. Looks like they can be removed easily. What should we do with these things?

Take 'em with us. I think the techies would want to know what these things are.

Hey, has anyone noticed these girls aren't wearing any legwear?

Gee, thanks for pointing out the obvious, Sherlock.

What is a 'sherlock'? a Sangheili asked.

Ah, it's an Earth thing. I'll explain it later.

Hey, guys, look at this. These kids are armed for bear.

No kidding. More like armed for grizzly. I mean, look at this. The brunette has an autocannon in her hands. Looks like a twenty mike mike. She's carrying drum mags for it and there's some kind of SMG on her back with more ammo.

The twenty mike mike's a Hispano-Suiza HS.404, and the SMG's called a M1A1 Thompson. That's nothing, take a look at what the blonde's packing. There's a MG151/20 in her hands, a lot of belts for it, and a couple of Panzerfausts on her back. And look. A rustling sound could be heard. ***"She has a Beretta Model 1935 in her hip holster. Damn, this is a rare gun. Looks customized too. There's this weird engraving on the grip. Looks like a yellow Kig-Yar in medieval armor. There's the words '506****th**** Joint Fighter Wing' and 'Noble Witches' above and below it. Don't know what it means though. Other than that, it looks normal." **The sniper heard the sound of a magazine being ejected. ***"Look, it even fires .32 ACP. You could empty the whole magazine into a Marine's visor and there wouldn't be anything worse than a couple of scratches.***

Thanks for the history lesson, the fireteam commander said sarcastically. ***"But what I want to know is why the hell are two adolescent girls carrying weapons that only Spartans should be able to carry, let alone wield? Anyone can answer that? Huh?***

No one answered.

No? Then pipe down and get these weapons off them before taking them into custody. On the double! the fireteam leader hissed.

***Sir. Yes, sir," **the other Marines responded quietly.

The sniper watched as the Marines pulled the girls' weapons off before two Marines picked the girls up and carried them in a fireman's carry, with the weight supported by their

shoulders.

"**Sir, what should we do with the girls' weapons?" **

"**Take them with us. The techies will want to see if there's anything weird with them that lets these kids carry them."**

"**Sir, I don't think there's anything different with them. They're heavy enough to feel normal to me."**

"**Perhaps I should carry them since you're feeling so weak, human?"** a Sangheili joked.

"**Like hell I am. Give it here."**

The sniper watched as the two teams marched back to the forest with their payloads and disappear into its depths.

"**This is Basecamp to Team Amazon. Mission is complete. Return to HQ to await further orders."**

"Roger that. We're Oscar Mike." The blue-haired, blue-eyed sniper got up with her sniper rifle: an SRS99K Series 6 sniper rifle system that fired the huge 14.5x114mm rounds so beloved of UNSC snipers. The dark grey pattern of the bullpup rifle seemed to blend in with the night even as the sniper stood fully upright.

"Come on," the sniper said to her partner and spotters. "Let's go."

* * *

><p>Somewhere east of the Ardennes Forest

0310 hours

Jakob crouch-walked to the next piece of cover with his GRAM suit's active camouflage system, or active camo as it was called, online. The system simply made his suit's energy shields non-opaque to visible wavelengths of light, infrared, ultraviolet, radar, X-rays, and ultrasound; causing the various energies to bend around the shield. This essentially rendered the user completely invisible save for the visor, since the user still needed to see out. The disadvantages are, of course, severely increased power usage and greatly weakened energy shield strength, but its advantages made it useful in certain situations.

In any case, Jakob was feeling grateful for the active camo as he found cover behind a low stone wall. As he and his team reconned the area, they'd passed by several unusual military patrols. It wasn't the frequency of the patrols that was unusual. They were fairly close to what should be the front lines of the Western Front, so the frequent patrols should have been normal.

What was unusual though, was the composition of the patrols.

Jakob saw American GIs riding tank desant on a German Panther tank, British Army soldiers walking alongside men in Italian Army uniform, and he heard French coming from inside a half-track bearing the German iron cross. In one particularly surreal moment, Jakob saw a GI

lighting a cigarette for a guy in Japanese Army uniform and joking around with him.

Naturally, Jakob reported this to the higher-ups. According to them, other teams have reported similar incidents and they honestly had no idea what to make of it. In the end, they'd just ordered Vanguard Team to continue reconnaissance and to report back on any more oddities.

So now here he was, scuttling from cover to cover, trying to see if things could get any more weird.

"Knox to Vanguard Team, anyone see anything really weird yet?" Jakob asked.

"**I'm currently watching an American half-track carrying some guys in German Army uniform. Does that count?"** Taiga asked semi-sarcastically.

"No, we've been seeing these mixed-up units for a while. Report back if you see something truly weird," Jakob ordered.

"**This is Boffin, I'm seeing something truly odd," **Tak reported.

"**What is it? Is it Hitler doing yoga?"** Taiga quipped.

"**No, but if I do see him, I'll be sure to get you his pad number,"** Tak quipped back.

"Alright, enough with the chitchat. What is it, Boffin?" Jakob asked.

"**Ah, right. What was that Earth mythical creature called? That one where it had a human's upper half and the lower half of that four-legged, hooved beast of burden?" **Tak asked.

"If you're talking about a horse, then that's a centaur," Jakob answered. Then he frowned. "Wait a minute, are you saying you saw a centaur?"

"**Wrong. I am currently **_**seeing**_** two centaurs conducting what looks like a patrol. They're right in front of that half-track.**"

"**Which half-track?"** Taiga asked irritably. "**There's lots of them running around in case you haven't noticed.**"

"Wait, are we actually entertaining the idea that centaurs exist?" Jakob asked incredulously. "I mean seriously, centaurs aren't real. They're just a myth."

"**Look five-zero meters in front of the green, beige, and brown-patterned half-track about 100 meters to the northeast. The one with the black L-shaped bars arranged to look like an 'X' painted on the side. I haven't the foggiest what it's called.**"

"Judging from your description, I'd say that's a Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 and the 'X' looks like a Balkenkreuz turned 45 degrees on its side. No idea why they'd do that, but-

Jakob shook his head. "But like I said, there's absolutely, positively no way that centaurs exist-"

"**Holy shit, those are centaurs,**" Taiga said incredulously.

At first, Jakob was too stunned to say anything. It didn't last long though.

"What. The. Hell?"

Jakob then turned then his attention to the half-track in question, then moved his gaze fifty meters to it front like Tak said. At first, Jakob was about to rub his eyes to see if he was seeing things, then he remembered that he had a helmet on and that it wouldn't do any good. So in the end, after running a quick diagnostic on his VISR, he decided to just take what he saw as truth.

Trotting fifty meters in front of the German halftrack, were two centaurs, exactly as Tak had said. Both of them were wearing US Army uniforms, with the green cloth even going over their horse halves, and helmets with holes that allowed their ears to stick out the tops. One was carrying a Browning Automatic Rifle, while the other had a M9A1 Bazooka. Both had large numbers of saddlebags along their flanks that looked like they were holding lots of ammo.

The WWII-era equipment failed to take away the fact that they were indeed centaurs though.

'_Okay, just what kind of messed-up Earth did we land on?_' Jakob wondered.

"This is just surreal," Jakob muttered out loud. "Even leaving aside the mixed-up units, I'm absolutely certain centaurs were not a part of any nations' forces in WWII, or at any other point in history."

"**Thanks for the briefing, Captain Obvious,**" Taiga said.

"**So now what, Knox?**" Tak asked.

Jakob shook his head. "You got me. This is above my pay grade to worry about. Just keep an eye out for anything weirdâ€¦|_er_."

"**Widget to Knox, I see something weird,**" Sar reported.

Jakob groaned. "Great. What now?"

"**I see castle.**"

Jakob was stunned for a moment. "Widget, do you mean 'castle' as in a Castle base?" Jakob asked, using the UNSC designation for a heavily-fortified underground complex.

"**No. Is castle castle, like from fairy tale.**"

Jakob's eyebrows raised themselves up pretty high. _'This I have to see.'_

He made his way to Sar's position, where she was lying prone neat the

top of a hill and looking through the scope of her battle rifle. "Friendly approaching from your six." He saw Sar glance backwards for a moment before returning her attention to the scope of her rifle. Jakob slow-crawled up until he was right next to her. He looked at where Sar was looking at, but from this distance, it looked like a white blob. "Okay, so that's this fairy tale castle you're talking about?"

Sar nodded. "Look."

Jakob peered through the scope of his MA5F at the distant locale.

The distant object turned out to be a collection of buildings and towers protected by a curtain wall, all of them painted white and capped with red roofs. Interspaced along the walls were several tower-like bastions, each one with AA guns positioned on their tops. Jakob zoomed in on the windows and he could make out the stubby noses of machine guns sticking out of them. Leading out the front gate, was a long, but thin airstrip. Further out was a perimeter wall lined with machine guns, AT guns, and patrolling troops. Just outside the perimeter wall were checkpoints, dug-in tanks, machine gun nests, and networks of trenches that spiderwebbed across the barren landscape.

Other than the military equipment and the airstrip—which Jakob decided was too thin for anything but light aircraft to take off and land from—it did indeed look like a castle out of some fairy tale.

"Huh, now that's interesting," he said. "The Allies must've converted that into a base—or headquarters considering the size of it."

"Is pretty."

Jakob glanced at Sar, but her face was obscured by the helmet and polarized visor and thus, he couldn't see her expression. "Uh, sure. I guess."

He was staring at the castle in the distance when an idea struck him. "Huh, if that place is an HQ, then they must have quite a bit of intelligence in them, right?"

"**What are you planning, Knox?**" Tak asked.

"I was thinking that maybe we could break in, gather intel on this crazy situation, and get out without anyone the wiser."

"**Are you insane?**" Tak asked incredulously. "**We'd be outnumbered a hundred to one in there. We'd get discovered in no time.**"

"Not if a small team were to enter, like us. Basecamp, what do you think?" he asked the commanders back in base camp, who'd been listening in on all comms between the teams.

"**Can your team pull this off?**"

"Guys?" Jakob asked.

"**Let's do this. I'm getting bored anyways," **Taiga

responded.

"**We can do this. It easy. Pirate base was harder," **Sar responded.

Jakob heard a sigh from Tak. "**Very well, then. If everybody's agreeing with it, I will go along with you.**"

Jakob grinned. "We can do this, Basecamp. Just give us the go-ahead and we'll be in and out in no time."

"**Affirmative, Vanguard One. Mission is approved. Stay frosty in there. Basecamp out." **Basecamp clicked off after that.

Jakob returned his attention to the outside as he noted that Taiga and Taka had both made their way to his and Sar's position and were lying prone with them.

"So, would you mind telling us how are we getting in?" Tak asked. "Because I don't think they'll just let us in if we knocked and asked nicely."

Jakob thought for a moment before increasing the magnification of the scope. He then scanned the castle ahead, examining every building, tower, and roof until he finally found what he was looking for.

"There. That really tall tower near the middle of the castle. There are only two guys up there. We can just knock them out with TTRs and enter through there. We can get out the same way too."

Taiga scratched her head. "That's great and all, but there's just one problem: how the hell are we getting up there? It's not like we can just sprout wings and fly up there."

That statement suddenly lit a light bulb in Jakob's head. "We don't, but we know someone, or someones, who do."

"Who?" Taiga asked.

Jakob turned on his VISR's menu and used it to locate a certain Yanme'e unit they'd met earlier and contacted it. "Vanguard One to Dragonfly One of Stealth Recon Lance-21, do you copy?"

After a moment, a synthesized voice with clicking, chirping, and buzzing sounds in the background answered, "**For what reason may military flight commander Branley be contacting this soldier which is unusual?"**

Jakob winced at the pronunciation. It sounded more like "Brrn'kii" to his ears. "Dragonfly One, can you meet up with my team at this location?"

"**This military wing is able to perform that action which is possible but why should [previous reference] perform this action which is strange/unusual due to lack of information which may be resolved by explanation?"**

Jakob explained his plan to Tzzz'kh't-79 and why he needed the Yanme'e for it.

He then suddenly heard a barrage of clicking over the radio before the Yanme'e answered, **"This military wing will cooperate/assist with the plan of military flight commander Branley which may be advantageous to the Greater Good due to the audacity of [previous reference]. May [previous reference] fly well."** ****The Yanme'e closed the link.**

Jakob then turned to his team and grinned. "Okay guys, its official. Plan A is in the works."

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: TACPAD: military version of the civilian COMPAD. Both were a series of portable computers developed and produced by Vyrant Telecom. While both have been known for their high durability, the TACPAD had taken this to memetic levels. TACPADs have been known to survive extreme physical and heat damage and continue operating, but had also been known to operate in rather extreme environments (examples include: vacuum, being submerged in seawater 500 meters deep, and on the surface of Balaho in winter). One example had even survived being hit by a bolt from a plasma rifle. Though the outer casing had melted, the electronics inside were undamaged and even operated perfectly after the casing was replaced.

[2]: SOEIV- Single Occupant Exoatmospheric Insertion Vehicle, also known as a Human Entry Vehicle. Also known informally as a drop pod, and sarcastically as an Egg, drop pods were originally developed as a high-speed, high angle alternative to dropships, which due to their shallow atmospheric entry angles, can be rendered vulnerable to enemy fire. The standard drop pod could hold one fully armored trooper and his/her equipment plus ammunition, and the latest drop pods have reconfigurable interiors to accommodate different species. Various variants of the drop pod also exist for deploying equipment, weapons, and even light vehicles.

[3]: Section 8 refers to a type of military discharge whereby the soldier in question is judged psychologically unfit for service.

[4]: The Scott Pilgrim Incident was one of the most infamous cases of friendly fire in UNSC history. On April 2, 2569, during the campaign to retake the Outer Colony of Lodestone from Colonial Liberation Front rebels, a forward observer unit called for a kinetic strike on an enemy strongpoint near the edge of the capital city of Pyrite. The only ship in range was the Strident-class heavy frigate UNSC Scott Pilgrim.

Unfortunately, the Scott Pilgrim's AI was offline due to maintenance and the ship couldn't fire the Rapier missile automatically. Therefore, the crew launched it manually, using auxiliary controls and guiding the missile into the strongpoint themselves. The strike was a success, the missile hit the strongpoint dead-on, except for one teensy thing. The crew had had very little sleep and was so tired, they didn't realize the missile pod's launch tube was empty. Fortunately, the system sensed that and cycled the next missile in line to fire. Unfortunately, the missile was one of the nuclear fusion missiles used for deep-space combat and had a

yield of 10 megatons, compared to the approximately 100 kiloton kinetic strike the forward observer team had called for.

As a result, the blast vaporized the enemy strongpoint while also levelling much of the city. Many casualties were incurred by UNSC forces due to the shockwave, yet due to the blast being far understrength than what it was supposed to be, only three dozen or so were fatalities were incurred. The _Scott Pilgrim_'s captain was given a court-martial due to the incident, but was narrowly averted due to the surviving rebels quickly surrendering to the UNSC forces, apparently having been cowed by the UNSC's willingness to use nuclear weaponry so close to the city.

Interestingly, the forward observer team, who'd been caught deep within the nuke's blast radius, miraculously survived by reportedly diving into their foxholes and lying very flat. The commander of the team would later say the famous line "We called in a hammer, and got an anvil instead." She was then reputed to have said, "When I find that sonuvabitch who dropped that nuke on our heads, I'm gonna grab a *bleep* and *bleep* his *bleep* until it *bleep* and then stick it in his *bleep*."

Naturally, the subject of the tirade did not make a comment in response.

[5]: Geckopad: a brand name for a type of adhesive strip using artificial setae. The setae was developed by studying the setae found on gecko feet, hence its brand name. The setae could hold a surprising amount of weight and was regularly used on powered armor to hold large amounts of equipment and ammo while limiting power consumption, though it took some amount of practice to remove items from a Geckopad.

[6]: Monomolecular blades are blades that have been manufactured to have an edge about a single molecule in width. Monomolecular knives made from Titanium-A are in regular usage with the UNSC. Monomolecular swords, however, were rarely seen due to their difficulty of use. The swords' weight due to the heavy and dense Titanium-A combined with their incredibly sharp edge meant that only skilled users could wield them without injuring others or themselves; something which most amateurs do not pay attention to. According to a study performed in 2560, about half the purchases of monomolecular swords came from amateurs who had never had experience in using itâ€|and over 95 percent of those amateurs have ended up in the hospital with injuries ranging from severed fingers to severed feet all the way to severed spines.

7. Chapter 5

****Disclaimer:** I will now append this to every chapter, just in case. I do not own either Strike Witches or Halo. Strike Witches is owned by Shimada Fumikane and Halo is owned by Microsoft Studios.**

****A/N:** Hello, everyone. Sorry about the long delay between this chapter and the last. I've been busy with schoolwork, had a rash of writer's block, and was just being plain lazy. Thus, to apologize, I've decided to split this chapter, seeing as both parts would make a pretty long chapter anyways. The next part should arrive in a few weeks. Thank you for reading my story and for being patient.**

****And also, please leave a review that's at least a single sentence long. It'd be nice to hear from you to see how I'm doing. And no flames. A bit too hot for me.****

****Without further ado, let's begin.****

*** * ***

><p>Chapter 5- First Contacts Never Go As Planned

****Somewhere near Sedan, France****

****0316 hours****

Jakob checked the magazine of his MA5F to make sure TTRs was loaded in. Despite the fact that TTR magazines were clearly marked with a red stripe to tell them apart from the normal ones, he still wanted to double-check. Getting hit by a TTR would sting in the brief moments before unconsciousness set in, but the results of getting hit by a 7.62x51mm HVAP round would be a bit moreâ€¦|permanent.

In any case, the red-tipped TTRs were indeed loaded into his current magazine. He nodded to himself before slapping the 32-round magazine back into his weapon.

Next, he reached under the barrel and thumbed the M304 grenade launcher's release, swinging the barrel out to the left to swap out the current round. He dumped out the unfired 40mm HEDP smart grenade and returned it to its appropriate pocket before pulling a black-nosed flechette shell and pushing it in, then locking the barrel shut with a slap and a satisfied nod. He knew the rules of engagement here was to avoid casualties, but it wouldn't hurt to be prepared.

Jakob then looked around at the abandoned barn they were in one last time. He and his team had found this place after searching around for a bit and were now using it as the jump-off point for his plan. The abandoned part worked in their favor, as did the large hole in the ceiling.

The only thing bothering Jakob was the hole. Its edges were charred black, as if a plasma focus cannon or pulse laser had burned through it. There was a blackened crater on the ground in line with the hole that seemed to further corroborate that theory, as well as a skeletal hand charred at where it was supposed to connect with an arm to suggest the target of said energy weapon; yet none of them made any more sense than they should.

Jakob shook the thoughts off and turned to Tak. "Okay, you ready?"

Tak just looked back at the Yanme'e behind him and hissed in resignation. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"What's wrong? Getting a little chicken about heights?" Taiga teased.

"It's not that I'm worried about," he said uneasily. "It's the fact

that I will be entirely at the mercy of someone I don't know and should that someone decide to drop me, I won't be able to stop it."

"Kh kh kh kh kh," Tzzz'kh't-79 clicked angrily, her antennae waving wildly at Tak. "That soldier which is under my command will not drop the Kig-Yar who is ignorant/misguided because that would be a failure of the mission and this wing will not allow this mission to fail."

The rest of Tzzz'kh't-79's lance, the hornless Minors in particular, seemed to pick up on their commander's anger and were clicking angrily as well. The three Majors managed to mostly resist the impulse to follow their commander and tried to control their files, but it seemed like a losing battle.

"Alright, alright, break it up," said Jakob, getting between the angry Yanme'e and the still uneasy-looking T'vaoan Kig-Yar. "Tizzkitty-79. He didn't mean anything personal by it. Let it go."

She stopped clicking and her antennae slowly returned to its normal twitching. As she did so, her Minors calmed down as well. "This soldier is calm which is the normal state but this soldier will not tolerate any more criticism of the soldiers under the command of [previous reference] which is not conducive to morale," she said.

Jakob nodded. "Got'cha." He then turned to Tak. "Tak, this guy, er-girl, er-lady, er—this female, is not going to drop you. Just let her pick you up and fly so we can get on with the plan, okay?"

Tak merely grumbled in response. He checked his Type-51 Carbine to make sure its magnetic accelerator was set for subsonic fire and checked its magazine and chamber one more time to make sure there were TTRs loaded in instead of the usual 8.7x60mm caseless radioactive rounds, which would have had a far more messy result against the targets they had in mind. "Well, I'm out of excuses. Let's get this over with then," he said finally after closing the chamber shut.

"Alright. Now there's just one more thing, but I can't rem-oh, yeah." Jakob grinned. "Let's commence Operation: From UNSC With Love."

"What?" Taiga asked.

Jakob sighed. "Never mind. Ancient pop culture reference, you wouldn't get it." He turned and gave Tzzz'kh't-79 a thumbs-up. "We're ready to go."

The Yanme'e Ultra clacked her mandibles together and unfolded her wings, the rest of her lance doing the same. She and her lance then activated their active camouflage systems and disappeared from sight.

As Jakob and his team stood up and activated their own active camouflage systems as well, they heard the buzz of Yanme'e wings behind them. One by one, each member of Team Vanguard felt the click

of Yanme'e exoskeleton on metal as each member was grabbed by a pair of Yanme'e, one holding a shoulder.

"This soldier will commence operation now," Jakob heard Tzzz'kh't-79 say from just above his right shoulder.

The members of Team Vanguard felt the odd sensation of being lifted up, for they were: by Yanme'e wings.

Jakob watched the ground draw away, then the barn in turn as the two Yanme'e holding him flew through the large hole in the ceiling and gain altitude before flying off in the direction of the castle in the distance.

"Hey, guys. How're you doing? You okay?" he asked his team members while airborne.

"**Fine, I guess. Feels kind of weird though,**" Taiga answered.

"**Kind of fun,**" Sar answered happily.

"â€|"

"Tak, you okay?" Jakob asked.

"**Yes,**" Tak said quickly.

Sar then said something to Tak in Essh'k [1].

"**No thank you, Sar. While closing my eyes might help, I refuse to do so in a potential combat zone while on my way to another potential one. I'll just look straight ahead, and try not to think aboutâ€|you know.**"

Jakob thought for a moment about how to help the poor guy out when he came up with something. "Kohime, you still there?" he asked the AI still in his TACPAD.

A moment later, the kimono-clad avatar of Kohime-1585 appeared on the softly glowing screen. "***_**Hai.**_** Do you need something done?"** the little electronic voice asked from Jakob's left arm.

"Locate the music file 'James Bond Theme' and play it over my team's comms. Set the file to loop automatically."

"**More background music, sir?"**

When Jakob nodded, the little AI sighed in resignation. "***_**Hai, hai.**_** File located, playing now.**"

A strange, but catchy tune involving various horn instruments with the occasional appearance of a guitar and some unidentifiable instrument began playing softly in the ears of Fireteam Vanguard. The tune spoke of adventure and intrigue in exotic lands, and promised plenty of excitement and danger along the way.

"**Huh. What an odd piece of music this is," **Tak said curiously.
"What is this supposed to be?"

Jakob chuckled. "This, my friend, is our history right there in that tune."

Jakob heard Taiga groan over wireless. ***"Don't tell me this is going to turn into flip music halfway through. I hate that crap."**

Jakob was speechless, for a multitude of reasons. "Okay, what? No. It stays like this for the whole tune. And for the record, flip music isn't crap. It's like a living fossil. The legacy of the ancient days when FTL travel was still a glimmer in the eyes of science fiction writers. How can you call that crap?"

Easy, Taiga countered. ***"It's crap. There, I said it."**

Jakob muttered something about philistines and tigers, and philistinistic tigers.

Well, regardless, Tak spoke up. ***"This is still a fairly pleasant piece of music. At the very least, it should last me the few minutes it takes for us to get to our destination."**

His words rang quite true. It took just over five minutes of flight before the castle was clearly in view, and Tak did not fidget or complain even once during that trip.

To Jakob, the castle looked even bigger in person. So did the tall radar mast now clearly visible extending from the roof of the largest building and the AA guns on the roofs and towers. Especially the AA guns. Jakob saw the twin barrels of 40mm Bofors guns and the larger QF 3.7-inch AA guns alongside quad-barreled Flakvierlings and the much larger 88mm flak guns. The stew of anachronisms here was seriously making his inner WWII history buff scream and rant about how wrong this all was.

Thus, Jakob concentrated on the one thing that made sense to avoid the splitting headache: their objective. Or rather, the tower that was their objective. "There, the tallest tower. Can you get us closer?" Jakob asked.

Jakob then felt his flight path shift towards the tower. As it got closer, he then noticed the two men standing near the top. "Okay, stop."

Jakob's movement suddenly came to a halt. He then lifted up his MA5F and looked through the 6x holographic scope mounted on top to take a look at their targets. Both were men: one was a young man who couldn't have looked a day over 18 in olive green USMC service uniform, and the other was an older man in his late 30's in the grey uniform of the German Panzergrenadiers. Both were carrying sniper rifles: the former with a scoped Springfield 1903 and the latter with, interestingly enough, a Panzerbüchse 39 antitank rifle with a scope mounted on it. The young man appeared to be trying to have a conversation with the older one, but the latter appeared to be ignoring him. Jakob couldn't tell from this distance what the former could possibly be trying to say, but it didn't matter either way.

"Tak, you have eyes on the two guys on the tower?" Jakob

asked.

"Yes, I have a clear shot on both of them. Which one should I take?"
Tak asked.

"I'll take the German. You take the American."

"Affirmative. On your shot."

Jakob then placed the red, circular reticule on the German. At first, he aimed for the German's chest to have the greatest chance of hitting him. But then he decided to aim for his neck instead. The Hyberzine would react more quickly if the neck was hit, and there was something about the German that reminded Jakob of some veterans of the H-C War he'd seen. Guys like those would probably get off a shot even in the few seconds it took for the Hyberzine to take effect from a chest shot.

Centering the red dot of the reticule over the man's neck, he gently stroked the trigger, the ammo counter on top changing from 33 to 32 as he did so.

TTRs were supersonic rounds designed to roughly approximate the ballistic performance of the original high velocity-armor piercing round at short ranges, and therefore, it would be impossible to entirely cancel out the sound of their firing due to the sonic booms of the rounds exiting the barrel. Fortunately, the suppressor on the end of the barrel was not designed to eliminate the sound—though it did cancel out the worst of it—but instead it modified the sound. The sound that came out from the suppressor mounted on the end of the MA5F sounded like nothing more than an off-note typewriter key being pressed, sounding absolutely nothing like a gunshot and thus preventing anyone within hearing range to tell that a gun had been fired. A few sharp-eared individuals nearby noticed the strange sound, but without a source to look for, they just shrugged their shoulders and moved on, which was an excellent thing for Team Vanguard.

The fact that the rounds were caseless didn't hurt either. Stealth missions tended to go better without hot brass raining down on an unfortunate sentry's head.

The TTR splattered against the German's neck; red against beige skin. The man's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before they closed and he slumped over, the Hyberzine having already taken effect. He quickly switched his aim to the other GI in case Tak missed, only to watch him slump over as well with a red splotch on his throat.

"**Target down,**" Tak reported with a hint of smugness.

Jakob grinned. _'Looks like I didn't have to worry about his aim after all.'_

"Alright, tower is clear. Take us in, guys-er, girls," he said quietly to the Yanme'e.

The Yanme'e carrying him drew closer and closer to the tower until he was hovering just above the makeshift sniper's nest the tower's top floor had become. Once there, the Yanme'e simply let go.

Jakob landed with a not-so-soft thud. Even the most skilled gymnast would've had trouble landing lightly in over 100 pounds of armor and equipment. Three more thuds next to him confirmed that his team had landed with him. Fortunately, no one was around to hear their not-so-quiet landing.

"Check the bodies for a pulse," Jakob ordered quietly.

Taiga and Tak walked over and checked the two men's necks for pulses.

"Got it. One pulse every 90 seconds, just like the manual says," Tak reports.

"I'm not getting oneâ€¦wait, there it is. This one's okay," Taiga reported at last.

Jakob nodded in satisfaction before turning back to the Tzzz'kh't-79 and her Yanme'e. "Can you girls hold down the fort here and hide these guysâ€¦" he gestured to the unconscious soldiers. "â€¦if anyone comes up here?"

Tzzz'kh't-79 clacked her mandibles together. "This wing will acknowledge/comply with the order of Branley which is logical."

Branley watched Tzz'kh't-79 and her lance start to tuck the unconscious soldiers away into a dark, secluded spot on the tower and collect their weapons for a moment before motioning to his team. "Alright, let's go."

His team followed him to a wooden door. Jakob placed his hand on the doorknob before stopping. "Remember, beyond this point, no audio communications. Only subvocals. Activate your VISR's T-ray scanner and overlay it onto the night vision. It'll help you avoid patrols and occupied rooms. Remember, active camo makes you invisible, but not undetectable. Crystal?"

"What crystal?" Sar asked.

Jakob again resisted the urge to facepalm. "Do you understand my orders?"

Sar nodded. "Yes. Why before no say so?"

Jakob let his head hang for a moment. "Never mind. Let's go." He twisted the doorknob and pulled the door open slowly, carefully. The door swings open with barely a squeak.

Jakob grinned. _'Looks like someone's been oiling this. Great for us.'_ He pulled it wide open. "Basecamp, this is Vanguard One. We're entering the castle. Beginning operation, over."

"Roger that. Proceed with caution. Also, be advised. The _Bamboo Cutter_ will be passing under the horizon soon and will not be available for support for another one hour, thirty minutes, over."

At that moment, Jakob wanted to curse orbital mechanics for working

correctly when everything else in this place was screwed up. Seeing as that would have no effect whatsoever though, he simply nodded in resignation. "Roger that, we'll keep that in mind. Vanguard One, out."

With that said, he closed the link and stalked down the stairway, followed closely by his team. The Marines had officially arrived.

* * *

><p>UNSC Command Post (callsign: Basecamp), somewhere in the Ardennes Forest

0326 hours

Lieutenant Colonel Avery Johnson closed the comm link to Vanguard One. He stood within the MOREIV [2] camouflaged from overhead observation by a hologram projector that projected an image of a large boulder in place of the massive drop pod. While it wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny from the ground, the soldiers and sentry guns stationed around it were supposed to prevent that.

Johnson was supposed to be commanding the reconnaissance operation, but something had completely drawn his, and the other officers', attention instead.

'_Now what the hell am I supposed to do with you?_' he thought wryly as he looked at the objects of his consternation.

The objects in question were the two girls lying on a pair of stretchers being tended to by a UNSC corpsman; one with hair the color of caramel and the other with hair the color of golden wheat. Both had the pale, corpse-like appearance of people under the effects of Hyberzine, but that wasn't what drew his attention. It was the fact that both of them appeared to be teenage girls that made them stand out.

That, and their decidedly out of place and extremely strange uniforms.

The one with the caramel hair was dressed in the navy blue coat of the old United States Marine Corps, complete with the equally blue tie and white undershirt peeking out from under the coat. The Eagle, Globe, and Anchor insignia sat proudly, if a bit incongruously, on her left breast, proudly proclaiming for all the world that this one was a Marine. The double bars of silver on her shoulders proudly proclaimed she was a Captain as well, which was even more absurd than the uniform considering her age. A quick glance at emblem on her upper right arm of her uniform revealed her unit as well: a black wolf, lips drawn back to expose snarling fangs, set against a sandy beige circle. The words "VMF-112" and "WOLF PACK" were inscribed in red above and below the wolf's snarling visage respectively. Johnson was able to quickly identify this due to having worked with the unit's UNSC descendant, VMFA-112, before and having seen its emblem.

The blond one on the other hand, was dressed in a long sleeved, night black coat with red trimmings exactly like those worn by WWII-era Luftwaffe airmen as dress uniform. A small eagle medal sat on the right breast but it, strangely, lacked the swastika normally found

below it. On the right arm of the uniform, was an emblem depicting an eagle diving at the Earth below onto some unfortunate soul and accompanied by a crimson lightning bolt behind it doing the same. A quick check with the _Salamander_'s shipnet [3] had revealed that this particular emblem belonged to Nachtjagdgeschwader 2, a German night fighter unit active during WWII.

While interesting in of themselves, they weren't the primary reason Johnson noticed the uniforms. The thing that attracted Johnson's attention were the girls' legwear.

Or rather, their lack of it.

Neither girl wore any legwear below the waist save for the blonde, who wore a pair black socks that stretched to her knees. Instead, both girls appeared to be wearing sets of feminine undergarments that matched the primary colors of the uniforms, and consequently left most of their legs bare.

If it weren't for the historically and meticulously accurate uniforms, not to mention their young ages, Johnson would've just assumed them to be workers at one of the more disreputable places. The kind that only allowed adults in.

And that was just disregarding the strange machines they had on their legs (which were now lying in a crate waiting to be shipped to the _Salamander _to be taken apart for study), the absurdly heavy (in both sense of the terms) weaponry they carried, and now the information one of his most trusted soldiers had just delivered to him.

"Asada, are you telling me you saw animal ears and tails on these girls prior to shooting them and that they disappeared the moment they became unconscious?" Johnson asked her incredulously.

Gunnery Sergeant Shinon Asada, the ODSN sniper, who'd taken off her helmet to reveal her electric blue hair and blue eyes, nodded once. "Yes, sir. I know it sounds a bit difficult to believe, but that is what I saw."

Johnson smiled a rue grin. "'A bit difficult to believe'. Now that's one hell of an understatement if I've ever heard one, Asada."

"No kidding!" one of the Marines standing near him said with a smirk. A quick glance at him showed his name to be Private First Class Ricardo Rodriguez on Johnson's HUD. The Marine's helmet was off, revealing a light brown Latino face and dark brown eyes twinkling with amusement. "That's gotta be the understatement of the century, dude!" he said shaking his head while trying not to laugh.

"I really don't think you should be calling superior officers 'dude', Rick," another Marine standing next to Rodriguez pointed out. A quick glance at her revealed her name to be Lance Corporal Lan Fang Dubois. Her helmet was off as well, this time revealing a face that would've been typical of a young Asian woman had it not been for her wavy black hair and jade green eyes. Judging from her tone and the wry smile on her face, she'd given this spiel many, many times before and had not a single effect to show for it.

"Don't sweat it, Lani! What's he going to do to us that's any worse

than recon in this wacky place?"

"How about running a lap around the forest? As in the Ardennes forest. Twice," Asada's spotter, Sergeant Alicia Gunther, nÃ©e Melchiott, replied flatly. "I'm sure your brain could use all the oxygen it can get."

"Ouch! That's cold, man. Like vac cold. I'm freezin' over here!" Rodriguez said melodramatically, clutching his chest all the while.

A Sangheili standing 2.89 meters (or 9 and a half feet tall, which is tall even by Sangheili standards) and dressed in the camouflaged-patterned combat harness favored by Sangheili troops in recent times turned towards Johnson and parted his mandibles slightly in a reasonably accurate approximation of a human grin. "Your ODSs appear to be quite spirited, Avery. The fire burns bright in their souls," he commented.

The addressed ODS in question merely grinned in response. "You got that right, Badess. It burns so bright, they can melt Titanium-A with those flames!" He then looked back at the assembled men and women to see that some sort of argument had now broken out among them. Apparently, this particular debate was about how various superheroes would match up against one another.

Truly a philosophical debate for the ages, worthy of the great Socrates and Plato had Comic-Con existed back in Ancient Greece!

"That being said, they could stand to turn down that flame a little," Johnson admitted ruefully.

The Sangheili, General Badess 'Jarhad, local commander of the Sangheili forces deployed to the surface; let out a belly-shaking laugh at that. "Nonsense! Warriors can never have too much fire in their souls. After all, that fire will be needed to vanquish their foes when the times comes."

This time, Johnson was the one to laugh. "Man, where do you come up with this stuff?! Do you write it down or does it seriously just pop into your head when the time comes?"

'Jarhad grinned once more. "The latter, as it happens. I think my daughter might be influencing me on that part. She always had a flair for lines like those."

"No doubt about that!" Johnson laughed.

He continued laughing for a while before turning to a corpsman who was tending to the two girls, his face serious once more. "How long will it be until we can administer the counteragent?"

The corpsman thought for a moment before answering, "It takes about an hour after administration before the counteragent for Hyberzine can be safely administered. In this case, another twenty-seven minutes should be enough, but it'd be best to give it thirty just to be on the safe side."

Johnson nodded. They looked completely normal with the corpsman

checking their pulse for irregularities, but if what Asada said was true, they might not even be human.

"Doc, I want them restrained when we wake them up. Maximum security."

Hospital Corpsman Third Class Sachi Kurotsuki looked at him in surprise. "Sir? These are just children. Why do you need to restrain them?"

Johnson shook his head. "Children who can apparently use strange machines we've never heard of before, wield heavy weaponry even a grown man couldn't, and apparently have retractable animal ears and tails. Doc, I do not want to deal with another surprise when we wake them up. Do it."

Kurotsuki frowned before nodding grimly. "Understood, sir." She walked over to a supply box and pulled out four sets of heavy-duty cuffs. Each one could restrain a Jiralhanae in full battle-fury and should be more than enough to lock down the girls and keep whatever surprises they have to a minimum.

Johnson nodded back before returning his attention to the still-arguing Marines, who had now switched gears to discuss the possible bust sizes of various superheroines. Johnson resolved the argument by the simple method of slamming his hands on the portable holotank and declaring, "That's enough out of you! I say Wonder Woman's got the biggest of the bunch! End of discussion!"

All argument ceased immediately. You just do not argue with Avery Johnson. Period.

One Rodriguez started to open his mouth as if to do just that, but Dubois clamped an armored hand over his mouth and thankfully prevented that achievement in stupidity from occurring.

Johnson reached into one of his pockets and lifted out one of the Sweet William cigars he loved so much. He then took out a UNSCMC-standard issue M13 combat knife. Using its monomolecular edge, he carefully sliced off the tip of the cigar before returning it to its holster. He then took out a tiny arc lighter and pressed the tip of the cigar into the heating element. The electric current ignited the cigar and wisps of fragrant, herby smoke soon wafted from the lit end.

Johnson took a moment to inhale a lungful of that smoke before grinning at his Marines. "Now then, I think we've had enough R&R to last us ten lifetimes. Let's get down to business."

* * *

><p>Somewhere within the unknown castle

0338 hours

Jakob and his team walked silently through the darkened hallway, their armored feet scrunching the carpeted floor, as they continued searching for intel. They'd been searching the buildings for about twenty minutes now. The terahertz radiation (T-ray) scanners lowered over their visors had so far worked, displaying the off-white

silhouettes of people even through walls and doors, making it easy for Vanguard to avoid contacts.

So far, the area they were in seemed to have no patrols, at all. Only a few of the rooms here were occupied, but their occupants were all asleep in their beds. Stranger still, were that all the occupants appeared to be female according to their figures visible on the T-ray scanners. It was all a bit odd to Jakob, but he learned long ago that you either adapt to the circumstances, or be swept away like driftwood on waves.

Aside from the lack of patrols and the occupants on the rooms, Jakob found the general luxuriousness of this place unusual, seeing as how he was used to the bare vanadium steel corridors of the Salamander. The carpet below their feet was rich and velvety, the doors looked like they were ornately carved wood, and the lighting on the walls looked like they wouldn't have been out of place in a Hilton-Hyatt. In fact, the whole place gave off the feeling of a five-star hotel rather than a military base.

'_What kind of a weird place is this? This doesn't look like any military base I've ever seen. Maybe the locals really did find a five-star hotel and turned it into a HQ?'_ Jakob dismissed those thoughts and turned his attention to a yet another ornate, wooden door on the side. This one had a large amount of metal engravings decorating it, blocking the T-ray scanner of his VISR and preventing him from seeing if there was anyone through it.

Taking a chance, he opened it. To his surprise, behind the door was a massive and just-as-ornate-as-the-rest-of-the-building bathroom. The entire place looked like it was carved out of marble. There were rows and rows of bathroom stalls on one end and rows and rows of sinks with brass faucets, though they could have been gold for all Jakob knew, on the other. A gigantic mirror stretched over the sinks like a large, reflective sunbather.

Completing the picture was a large fountain between the sinks and toilets. Bronze fish-shaped spouts sprayed jets of water around in arcs that formed an elaborate, mesmerizing pattern. While this was a surreal (and frankly, ridiculous) sight, it had absolutely nothing to do with the intel they were looking for.

'_Creepy. Who'd want to go with those things watching?'_ he thought as he stared at one of the fish spouts. He swore the thing was staring at him, daring him to go while it was watching with its little fishy eyes. '_Definitely creepy, but still five-star hotel material. Maybe six-star actually,'_ Jakob thought as he eased the door back closed.

"Area clear. Nothing of interest. Keep looking," Jakob said out loud, in a manner of speaking. His words were subvocalized, barely a murmur, and only audible via sensors in his helmet that read the vibrations of his vocal chords, converted it into sound, and transmitted it to the rest of his team via short bursts of radio signals. It was a foolproof, silent way of communicating with each other without resorting to hand signals and has served the UNSC well in any number of missions requiring stealth.

With that said, Team Vanguard continued their hunt as they walked through the luxurious surroundings.

* * *

><p>Striker Hangar, 506***th**** JFW A-Unit
Base**

0340 hours

Marian Carl crouched over her XP-51G Mustang Striker as she fiddled with its internal workings, mumbling to herself all the while. She'd read the latest issues of Popular Science and combined with the information she gleaned from technical manuals regarding strikers, she thought she could add a couple miles per hours to the striker's top speed. Either that, or the engine would explode. But that's the works. Now if she could just get this wire tightened in, then maybe-

"So how's your progress going with Junko? Did you two make out when you visited her?"

The nature of the question, as well as the suddenness of it, caused Marian to jerk her head up in surprise. Unfortunately, the presence of her striker's right horizontal stabilizer prevented her from completing the motion, with very painful results. As Marian stood up slowly, rubbing the swelling spot on her head where it hit the stabilizer, she glared at Carla Luksic, who was trying to whistle innocently save for two things that prevented her from doing so:

One, she couldn't whistle.

Two, she failed at looking anything like innocent.

"My 'progress', as you put it, is none of your business. And we didn't make out," Marian added. "She was asleep by the time I visited her," she lied.

Carla hung her head in a dejected look. "Hmm, a pity."

Marian could feel a headache start to build up. "And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?"

The platinum blonde witch held up a finger in response, like a schoolteacher admonishing an ignorant student. "Simple. Had you made any significant progress in your relationship, you could have gotten Takei to use her influence to add weight to our argument to achieve our goal of not splitting up the wing."

That was when Marian snapped. She grabbed a wrench and threw it at the cheeky witch, shouting, "I'm not going to use my relationship with Takei for that!"

Carla dodged the impromptu projectile. "But-"

Marian picked up a fully loaded toolbox instead.

The platinum blonde-haired witch got the message and ran off as fast, ignoring the laughter of the hangar personnel and mechanics. Because if that toolbox couldn't catch her, then the person holding the toolbox doubly couldn't.

Marian sighed and lowered the improvised weapon of bodily harm she'd raised up. "I swear, that girl is going to drive me nuts one of these days," she muttered to herself.

As she set the toolbox down on the ground she noticed the dark streaks of grease on her hands. Then she noticed them on her arms. And her uniform.

"And it's probably in my hair too," she muttered dejectedly.

It was decided. She was going to take a shower before hitting the hay. She was not going to leave grease stains on her bed sheet if she could do anything about it!

As she strode off though, she remembered one last thing she had to do before getting to take a bath. With a sigh, she changed direction and headed towards the ops center.

* * *

><p>Somewhere within the unknown castle

0345 hours

Jakob opened the wooden door and swept the room, followed quickly by his team who did the same. After passing a room with nothing in it but a large wooden table surrounded on three sides by large, and comfortable-looking, couches, Jakob chose a corridor that led to this room.

This room looked far more promising than the last. This room had a large window at the far end, which let in what little moonlight there was and partially illuminated a large desk made of a dark wood. On top of the desk rested two brass plaques and neat stacks of paper. Behind it was a chair made apparently of the same kind of wood the desk was made of. Sitting towards the desk's left, facing the desk itself, are several steel file cabinets, presumably full of files. Against the wall to the right, there was a map showing continental Europe, with pins of varying colors stuck into it.

All in all, this room screamed commander's office.

Jakob grinned under his helmet. "Guys, I think we hit the credpot."

"_Sugoi_," Taiga said with a tone as dry and flat as a salt pan at high noon. "Now can you hurry up and look for that intel so we can get the hell out of here?"

Jakob sighed. "No sense of accomplishment, eh Taiga? Fine, let's do this. I'll take the desk. Tak, Sar." He aimed a finger at the file cabinets. "Go look in there and scan any documents that look even remotely interesting. It might give us some clues about this crazy place."

"Hmm, not my usual choice for reading, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt to branch out," Tak said before going over and pulling out a drawer.

Sar went over and pulled out another drawer. "Hmm. Lots of paper. Need time to scan." She then pulled out the first file there and began to do just that.

Jakob nodded in satisfaction and then turned to the last member of his fireteam, who was looking around the room, until she noticed him staring.

"If you're going to ask me to help search this place, you're better off asking Tak to stop reading for a week."

Jakob pondered this for several moments before arriving at the same conclusion. "Yeah, you're right. Go watch the corridor outside and tell us if someone's coming."

Taiga hefted the M739B SAW she was carrying with its suppressor, which looked incredibly ridiculous to Jakob considering it was mounted on a light machine gun.

"Will do," she said with a tone somewhere between relief and resignation, before opening the door and exiting the office as quietly as she could.

Jakob then turned around and looked straight at the desk with its neatly stacked, but numerous, piles of paper. He let out a breath. "Right, time to get investigating."

* * *

><p>Kunika's Room, 506***th**** JFW A-Unit Base**

0346 hours

Kunika Kuroda got up out of bed with a hand rubbing eyes still shut with sleep and sand, and yawned. The reason for the interruption of blissful slumber was something that had interrupted people's sleep for eons and eons before, even before the invention of the bed.

She had to make a trip to the little girl's room.

Kunika carefully moved the still peacefully slumbering Waka aside and got into her pair of Fusoan-style slippers. She'd always felt uncomfortable using that bathroom. The little fish statues creeped her out a little, like they were staring at her as she did her business. Nonetheless, the call of nature trumped the gaze of eerie bronze fish this time as she trudged off towards her destination.

* * *

><p>Office somewhere in the unknown castle

0347 hours

As Jakob sat on the chair glancing through paper sheet after paper sheetâ€

'_Who the hell uses paper anymore?_' he thought before remembering this was the 20th century, not the 26th.

and uploading them to the waiting shipnets, he began to get an interesting picture of this alternate Earth they found themselves in.

Not interesting as in "Gee, that's an interesting book you've got there", but interesting as in "Gee, that's an interesting rainbow-colored ostrich you've got there," kind of interesting.

The report he was holding proved his point. While the previous reports were assorted supply requisition forms, personnel listings, maintenance reports, etc.; this one was different. As he glanced through it, he noticed the word "Neuroi" repeated throughout the report.

'_Okay, exactly what's this Neuroi this report keeps on babbling about? I mean, the only thing it should be saying are Nazis, shouldn't it?_' he wondered as he went back to the beginning and read it more closely.

The report was dated March 4, 1945 and had been written by a Wing Commander R. H. Grunne.

'_Now where have I heard that name before?_' he wondered before remembering the two plaques on the desk. He grabbed one and turned it around, revealing a "G. Preddy" etched into it. '_Oops. Wrong one.'_ He turned the other one, which read "R. H. Grunne". '_That's it. That's the name. This Grunne guy must be the base's commander, or at least someone high up on the command chain. Wonder why there are two plaques though? I've never heard of a base with two commanders before. Must be some kind of politics thing,' _he thought before turning the plaques back to where they'd been facing and resumed reading the report.

"Today, A and B-Units of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing encountered a new class of Neuroi. The new class exhibited a unique body and wing shape (see Addendum 1 for details) as well as a speed of almost Mach 1 as reported by Sedan Base's radar, far higher than previously recorded flight speeds and higher than the top speeds of even our fastest strikers. Our witches were unable to overtake them in a tail chase and were only able to shoot them down by engaging them head on. It is my opinion, as well as that of the commanding officer of B-Unit, that our units should be concentrated in strength to be able to better combat these new Neuroi. If the 506th Joint Fighter Wing continues to be split up, I fear we will be defeated in detail by these new units."

Jakob frowned in deep thought after reading that section. '_Okay, looks like the brass are wrong about these 'Neuroi' being a new nickname for Nazis if I'm reading this report right.'_

He scrolled down to Addendum One to read the description of this new class of "Neuroi". The more he read of it, the more his frown deepened. He tried to recall if any aircraft, Allied or Axis, ever resembled that description, and he came up empty.

'_I remember reading about some crazy planes used by both sides, but I don't remember ever reading about a T-tailed, swept-wing fighter with a single jet engine before. It sounds more like something from the post-war era. What's something like that doing in 1945? And what's the deal with the witches? Here, it sounds like they're

supposed to be pilots, but that doesn't really make sense. The only witches I remember having anything to do with WWII were the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, and it would definitely not make sense for them to be here in the Western Front. So what's the deal he-'

"Are you all right?"

That question snapped Jakob out of his thoughts, but didn't quite return him to reality. "What?"

Jakob heard a brief snort. "I asked, 'Are you all right?'" Tak repeated. "You've been staring at that same sheet of paper for a while now and you've been ignoring my attempts to get your attention."

Jakob shook his head to clear his thoughts more properly. "Sorry, I was thinking about something. I'm okay. So what's 'gating [4]?"

Tak pointed a clawed finger at the map of Europe pinned on the wall. "While I don't claim to be an expert in Earth geography, doesn't that map look oddly inaccurate to you?"

Jakob got up from the chair and walked towards the map Tak had been indicating. As he examined the map, he didn't see anything wrong. There were green pins stuck in the western side of the Rhine and France denoting what were likely Allied positions and black ones in the other side of the Rhine, Germany, and Central Europe likely denoting Axis positions.

It was when his eyes scrolled over to the center of France where the name usually was that he noticed it.

"What?" he asked incredulously as he saw "Gallia" where "France" should be.

"Yeah, that." Tak pointed elsewhere. "Look here too."

Jakob's eyes followed the clawed finger to Italy, where he saw not one, but two countries: Venezia and Romagna. The northeast section of the boot-shaped country was marked as Venezia, while the rest of the country existed as Romagna.

"Well, that's definitely different," he muttered as he stood back and scanned the map for upload into the shipnets.

It was while scanning the entirety of the map that he noticed the edges of North Africa peeking out from the bottom edge and the pins stuck in there. Green pins were surrounding several black ones in the northern parts of Africa, roughly where Tunisia, Libya and western Egypt should be. His eyes drifted to the name Cyrenaica in place of Libya and he nodded in satisfaction.

'At least they got something correct in this screwy world we're in,' Jakob thought until he remembered the pins and looked again at the black ones surrounded by green ones.

"Well that's not right." Jakob noticed Tak tilting his head at him, so he explained. "I just read a report saying this is 1945. According to this map, it looks like the North African campaign is still

active, yet it should've been resolved back in 1943."

"Another oddity of this alternate dimension we've been hearing about?" Tak ventured.

"No, it doesn't make sense. I mean, how have the Germans, or these Neuroi, been holding out for this long? I mean, look at them." He stabbed a finger at the cluster of black pins in North Africa. "They're completely cut off from resupply from all directions. Why haven't they run of fuel and ammunition yet? Hell, why haven't they _starved_ to death yet? It just. Doesn't. Make. Sense."

Jakob watched as a small message box indicated the upload was finished and he took a moment to take some deep breaths to calm down before continuing. "How much info have you and Sar dug out of those file cabinets?"

This time, Sar spoke up. "Lots. Lots and lots and more lots," she said emphatically.

"Indeed, we did," Tak agreed. "Between the two of us, we've scanned and uploaded quite a bit of data. We haven't had time to peruse them, but from what little I gleaned through, it all seems to be quite interesting."

"Interesting," Jakob repeated with a wry smile. "You know, there's an old curse in Chinese that goes something like this: 'May you live in interesting times'."

Sar tilted her head at Jakob in confusion. "Why that bad? Interesting time is interesting. Not interesting time is boring."

Jakob just laughed softly at that. "Not always. Especially when those interesting times involve us getting in the line of fire. Remember the _Heart of Darkness_?"

Sars hissed softly. "That not interesting. That crazy."

"**Well, it **_**was**_** interesting,"** Taiga added over wireless. **"Until they stopped coming at me though. It got less interesting after that,"** she complained.

"Perhaps it was because they were only half the beings they were after facing you that they stopped doing so?" Tak asked sarcastically.

"Exac-" Taiga started to shout before she remembered she was in potentially hostile territory and lowered her voice. "Exactly. That was so much fun. Why wouldn't they come at me like that? It was so much fun when they were," she said more quietly.

Tak hissed theatrically. "Alas, my wit is wasted on this one, for her uncouth manners bring nothing but frustration and confusion to all beings of intelligence. Oh, woe is me, woe is me."

"_Oi_, if you're going to insult me, do it in English or Japanese, _baka_," Taiga said tersely.

Tak looked to Jakob and spread his arms in exasperation, as if to say, "What can you do?"

Jakob coughed to suppress a bout of laughter, which would not have turned out well for him considering who he'd have been laughing at. "Alright, that's enough, guys. We've got the intel, so quit standing around gobbing. Let's clean up and get out of here."

After making sure they'd left no trace (or as little trace as possible) of their presence, Vanguard exited the office. Jakob closed the door as quietly as possible, with the clack of the door closing just barely audible.

* * *

><p>506***th**** JFW A-Unit Base Ops Center**

0357 hours

As Marian entered the well-lit room with the enormous table sitting in the center of it, various personnel who saw her saluted.

"At ease," Marian said. Everyone then got back to work as she walked towards the radar station.

Even at this late hour, there quite a few radio operators and radar technicians on call. Since the Neuroi apparently never slept, there was no reason for the Allies to be caught with their pants down just because everyone had gone to bed. Thus, just as there were night witches, there too were the night staff.

The radio operator turned at the sound of Marian's voice and started to salute.

"At ease, Kensley," Marian said as the operator returned to his station. "Anything happened tonight?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. The Neuroi have been pretty quiet tonight. I guess they're being chickens tonight. You girls probably scared the shit out of them after you trashed those new models they sent out."

Marian smiled. It was good that the troops' morale is still this high, even after how long this war's been turning out. "Probably did, Kensley. They don't call us Devil Dog Witches for nothin', you know."

The operator smiled back as he continued his work. "Semper fi, ma'am. There ain't no Neuroi that can take on the USMC."

Marian had chuckle at that. "I'll semper fi to that, Kensley." She then took a look at the clock hanging above them. "Huh, three more minutes until Wittgenstein's report. It'll probably be another 'No contact, proceeding with patrol' kind of thing though. That girl makes those hourly reports like clockwork," she laughed.

The operator blinked in surprise. "Ma'am, are you sure she makes those reports every hour?"

Now it was Marian's turn to be surprised. "What do you mean? She should've made one almost an hour ago. Are you saying she didn't?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, ma'am."

Marian frowned. "That's odd," she muttered. Though she and B-Unit had only been here for a few weeks, they had come to get to know their A-Unit counterparts quite well. She, in particular, had gotten along pretty well with Heinrike; probably something about their similar attitudes towards all things military.

One thing she'd learned about the Karlslandan witch was that she operated on a strict timetable while on patrols, making a report every hour and after every engagement. Personally, Marian thought that her "By-the-Schedule" personality wasn't a good mindset to get into since it might make her too predictable and vulnerable to ambushes, but that wasn't the point here.

The point was: why would someone that obsessive about following the schedule miss a regular report?

Marian knew there was no point in berating Kensley for not knowing that. He was new to the base and didn't know Heinrike's habits, so instead she ordered, "Contact Major Wittgenstein. Ask if everything's okay."

"Wilco." The operator then dialed the frequency for the night witches' radio network before speaking, "This is 506th A-Unit Base to Major Wittgenstein. Do you copy, over?"

No response came. Heinrike's stern voice never responded.

Marian felt a chill crawl up her spine. "Check with Jenni-I mean, Captain DeBlanc."

"This is 506th A-Unit Base calling Captain DeBlanc. Do you copy, over?"

Again, no response came. Nothing but static that raked at Marian's ears instead of Jennifer's usual cheer.

"Kensley, get in contact with the night witches' radio community. Find out where their last position was and get someone to search for them there."

"Yes, ma'am."

Marian took a moment to listen to the radio operator carrying out her orders before turning to head towards her commander(s)' room. If there was really trouble, she needed them both awake for this.

* * *

><p>Somewhere within the unknown castle

0357 hours

Fireteam Vanguard began to retrace their steps through the base. Jakob was initially quite nervous at his plan seemingly being carried out perfectly, expecting Finagle to strike the moment he let down his guard. Yet as they advanced back through empty corridor after empty corridor, Jakob finally allowed himself to relax his guard and feel a

sense of relief at having pulled this off without a hitch.

He was still feeling that when a door in front of him suddenly opened and slammed into his face, disturbing the cloaking field and revealing the now-suddenly-visible Jakob Branley to anyone looking in his direction. Finagle's Law had struck.

* * *

><p>Just a few moments beforeâ€|

Kunika Kuroda yawned as she wiped her hands dry of the water she'd been using to wash them. The little fish fountains had proven as creepy as always, and she'd found herself choosing the stall furthest away from them.

Now though, she felt quite awake as she returned the soft towel back to its rack. As she walked to the door, she wondered if she should either read a book or practice some kenjutsu with her Type 99 bayonet to return her state of mind to one more conducive to slumber.

She was still wondering as she pushed open the bathroom door and felt it hit someone with a muffled "Oomph".

Though the Kuroda family weren't exactly rich anymore, they were still nobles. Thus, Kunika's family had strived to teach her some basic etiquette. They weren't particularly successful in that regard, but she still at least knew when to apologize or not.

And this was most certainly the time for the former.

"Ah, gomen! I was just-"

Her words cut themselves short as she gazed upon the figure she'd hit.

The personâ€"at least, it looked like a personâ€"was dressed in some kind of armor that covered it from head to toe. The armor appeared to be consisted of sections of mottled dark grey and black metal plates that molded to the person's form like the shells of beetles and other similar insects. What appeared to be some kind of black material could be seen between the gaps of the plates, looking almost like the witch combat bracers she wore into battle. The armor also seemed to be covered with pockets and holders. She could see what looked like magazines and grenades sticking out of some of them.

The helmet was unlike anything she'd ever seen. It completely obscured the person's face. There appeared to be flat breathing apparatuses where the mouth was similar to the gas masks she'd seen mundane soldiers use when they had to fight through miasma-contaminated areas. That, however, was comparatively normal compared to what was above it. Where the eyes should be, there was instead a multifaceted plate with small lenses on both ends. While Kunika might've spent some time wondering how anyone could see past that, it was what the person was holding that grabbed her attention.

Clutched in the person's armored gauntlets was a rifle of a peculiar design she'd never seen before. The military part of her mind noted

it was quite large and bulky, and what looked like the magazine was behind the trigger group, actually making it much smaller and less bulky than had it been in a normal position. It also had some kind of wide-bore weapon underneath the barrel that looked like a grenade discharger from what she could see.

That part of her mind would've found the weapon utterly fascinating had it not also noted that the armored person's finger was placed directly on the trigger. In other words, this person either had no idea what firearm safety was, or he/she/it was ready to fire at the slightest provocation.

Somehow, she very much doubted it was the former.

* * *

><p>On the other side of the encounterâ€|

Thoughts flew at light speed through Jakob's head as he and the chestnut-haired Asian girl before him exchanged stares.

_'Holy Motherfucking Muhammad___, where the fuck did she come from? Why did she choose that particular fucking time to open the door? Is the universe out to get me, or am I really just that unlucky?_

'_Think. What would dad do in this fucked-up situation?_'_

As the stupid, T-ray resistant door finally slammed shut, he thought of something. It was stupid and completely idiotic, but it was the only thing he could think of in the few seconds he had before the shock wore off.

He took his left hand off his MA5F, raised it up in an open-palmed gesture, and said clearly, but quietly enough as to not alert anyone else, "We come in peace."

In retrospect, that might've been more effective had he not been holding an assault rifle in one hand, with his finger on the trigger no less.

The Asian girl, who'd been stunned into silence by Jakob's sudden appearance, appeared to have been knocked out of her shock and started to open her mouth.

Jakob would never know whether she was going to return his greeting or scream for help, because at that moment, a blurry outline of a person rushed out the corner of his vision and smashed into the girl, bowling her over on her back. As the cloaking field was interrupted, the blur resolved into Taiga's armored figure; one hand clamped over the girl's mouth and the other holding her suppressed M739 SAW, which was pointed directly at the girl's head.

"Don't move a muscle. Don't speak a word. Don't even breathe unless I say so, or you're going to get a 7.62 _miri_ tap right into the forehead. Am I clear?" Taiga hissed.

The girl looked pale. She looked to be either too frightened or too shocked to make a reply.

Jakob sidled up next to his bloodthirsty teammate. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What the fuck does it look like? I'm keeping this girl from blowing our cover."

Jakob was seriously fighting the urge to facepalm. "You do realize that you could've just shot her and saved us this trouble, so why are you making like you're going to take her hostage?"

Taiga crouched there for a few moments as she pondered the reasons for her actions.

"She no do wrong," Sar piped up.

Jakob raised an eyebrow under his helmet. "How's that?"

He then heard an exasperated hiss from Tak. "Jakob, my boy, you're a good leader, but sometimes it seems like you're out of touch with the outside world." He then pointed a clawed finger in the air. "Listen and learn, young chick."

Jakob stopped and did just that. The surroundings were quiet, very quiet. The only sounds present were the distant footsteps of patrols on the floors above and below and the muffled sounds of the Asian girl on the floor trying to speak, or scream, through the armored hand covering her mouth. Other than that, all was silence.

He started to get annoyed after a while. What was the point in pointing out the silence? What did it have to do with not fir-

His eyes widened. '_Of course,'_ he realized suddenly. '_Suppressed guns aren't silent, and a suppressed machine gun would be the farthest thing from silent. The noise would wake up the other occupants.'_

Jakob looked at his erstwhile teammate still crouching over the Asian girl with a bemused look under his helmet. Whether Taiga knew it or not, and for all her bloodthirsty impulses and anti-social nature, she had good combat instincts.

"What?" Taiga asked testily when she noticed.

"Ah, nothing. Let's just get this girl somewhere isolated and Hyb her so we can get out of here al-"

"Contact," Sar reported.

Jakob briefly swore and crouched down. "Where?"

"Corridor left ahead. I see flash-"

Then suddenly, Jakob saw someone dash out the corner. He blinked in momentary surprise to see what appeared to be a blonde-haired teenage girl wearing the blue uniform of the old United States Marine Corps. It was quite a novel experience for him considering he'd only seen uniforms like those being worn by dummies in museums before.

The Colt M1911 pistol she was pointing at him was also something he'd only seen in museums up 'til now and was just as novel for him.

Seeing the venerable, old pistol which had served as the primary sidearm for the old United States Marine Corps for over two centuries almost made him geek out right then and there. If not for the fact that said venerable, old pistol was being pointed directly at him, he would've. As it happenedâ€¦

"Drop your weapons and put your hands in the-"

Unfortunately for both of them, seeing a loaded weapon pointed at him caused Jakob's training to go into effect. His MA5F shot up of its own accord and his finger squeezed the trigger. A staccato burst of off-key typewriter clacks emanated from the suppressed weapon, sending a red hailstorm of Hyberzine-laced paint bullets towards the girl, but not before the girl's finger had squeezed first, ending in a thunderous bark echoing from the .45 caliber pistol in her hands.

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: Essh'k is the primary official language of the Eayn Confederacy. Originally the native language of the Ruuhtan Kig-Yar, it became the lingua franca of the Confederacy 96.3 tarsiks (about 52 Earth years) prior to their first contact with the Covenant and temporary dissolution afterwards. T'vaoan and Ibie'shan Kig-Yar each speak a regional dialect of Essh'k that differs slightly from the original in vocabulary and pronunciation. Human linguists studying Essh'k have compared the differences in the three dialects to the differences between American, British, and Australian English.

[2]: MOREIV: acronym for Multiple Occupant Reusable Exoatmospheric Insertion Vehicle. These massive drop pods were a post-war development of the venerable SOEIV. Measuring 12 meters long, 12 meters wide, and 12 meters tall; and weighing around 200 metric tons empty, the MOREIV was divided into three floors, the bottom two of which can be configured to carry a wide variety and amount of cargo and personnel. In addition, each MOREIV was also heavily armored and armed with weaponry on its top floor, so much so that they've been nicknamed "Droppable Bunkers". As its name suggested, the MOREIV was designed to be returned to the mothership after each drop, though the drop pods were so big and heavy only the largest dropships could bring them back up for redeployment. Interestingly enough, a survey conducted on the UNSCMC revealed that Marines preferred to use MOREIVs that have survived the most number of drops. When questioned why, the Marines insisted that they were the "luckiest ones" and hoped the luck will rub off on them during a combat drop.

[3]: A shipnet is the local Waypoint network of a ship. Every ship has its own shipnet for research and entertainment. The contents of each ship's shipnet will differ due to each crews' preferences and the lack of regular updates from the official Waypoint network. It's not uncommon for UNSC ships operating in frontier space to have shipnets that are months, sometimes years, out of date with the rest of the network.

[4]: What's 'gating: slang. Approximately equivalent to the 21st century greeting "What's up?" Theorized to have developed from the term "astrogation".

8. Chapter 6

****Disclaimer:** I will now append this to every chapter, just in case. I do not own either Strike Witches or Halo. Strike Witches is owned by Shimada Fumikane and Halo is owned by Microsoft Studios.**

****A/N:** Hello, once more! And I'm back with the next chapter of HalCoN! I said I'd be back in a few weeks, didn't I?**

****For background music during this chapter, I recommend listening to the Assassin's Creed Brotherhood soundtrack: "The Brotherhood Escapes". It seems appropriate for this chapter.****

****And as always, please leave a review that's at least one sentence long. It would help me greatly to know what you readers think of my story and it would go a long way to helping me improve it.****

****Anyway, that's it. Please enjoy.****

* * *

><p>Chapter 6- And the Chase is On!

****Rosalie's Room, 506****th**** JFW A-Unit Base****

****0405 hours****

Rosalie's eyes snapped open as she was wrenched from the depths of a pleasant dream by the boom of the gunshot. She quickly sat up as her lover did the same.

Geena was the first to ask. "What the-"

Her interruption came in the form of peculiar clacking sounds sounding not too unlike that of a typewriter that needed its keys fixed. Geena didn't understand what the noise was, but Rosalie did. She'd once attended a demonstration of a Maxim Silencer, and the sounds coming from outside the door sounded disturbingly close to the ones made by that .22 caliber rifle long ago.

"Dress, weapons, now!" Rosalie shouted.

Those three simple words were all Geena needed to take action. They'd worked together for so long that teamwork was second nature to them.

Rosalie paused only to throw on the Belgican military coat that she'd discarded on the floor before pulling out the top drawer of her nightstand, revealing a Browning Hi-Power pistol, two spare magazines, and an ear radio/throat mike set. More gunfire erupted from outside the room as she hurriedly equipped the radio set. After jamming the two magazines into a spare pocket, she switched the pistol's safety off and rushed towards the door with Geena right behind her before yanking it open.

Immediately, she was greeted by the sight of a large green bolt of light flying through the corridor with a shrill whine. She tracked the bolt as it flew to her right until it smashed into Marian. Or

rather, Marian's shield. The rune-engraved circle of blue light that was Marian's shield absorbed the bolt as it exploded against the circle. Rosalie saw the carpet below blacken and catch fire, and the stone walls around the explosion glowed bright red. Even from here, Rosalie could feel the heat from whatever that green bolt of light was made of as a wave of scorching dryness flowed around her.

It didn't last long though. As the smoke from the burning carpet rose through the air, it reached the sprinklers above and set them off. All of them. Water began spraying around the area, and Rosalie could hear cries of surprise from inside the other rooms.

'_Well, at least they're awake now,'_ Rosalie thought wryly.

She sighed in relief as the explosion faded and Marina looked to be unharmed. Then she saw what appeared to be sprays of red mist were bouncing off of Marian's shield, as that same peculiar clacking noise from earlier filled the air.

"Captain Carl!" Rosalie shouted.

"Wing Commander!" Marian was pushed back a few steps by the force of dozens more sprays of red mist. "Get back!" she shouted to Rosalie.

Two doors on the opposite side of the hallway then burst open. Adriana stood in one still dressed in pink lingerie soaking wet from the sprinklers while holding a Beretta M1923 in one hand. In the other doorway, Isaac stood wearing only a pair of black shorts and a white bra, also soaking wet. She would've looked like a harmless girl had it not been for the holstered Webley revolver on her hip, the M1897 shotgun held in her hands, and the bandolier full of 12-gauge shells hanging around her.

All of their gazes immediately shifted to Rosalie's left, where the fire was coming from. To her surprise, there were four figures dressed in some kind of dark-patterned armor firing strange weapons at Marion. Three of them looked human, but one looked more like some kind of dinosaur than a person.

It was one of the human-looking ones that had fired the emerald bolts, apparently from some kind of violet-colored weapon that looked like nothing less than a viper's head with its jaw wide open and displaying its needle-sharp fangs. Greenish light arced between the weapon's "fangs" at its tip, illuminating the area in front of it in the same light.

One of the other armored figures then slapped down the violet weapon. "Stow that weapon!" the figure shouted before returning its attention to the fight at hand.

The one holding the violet weapon slipped it into a hip holster before putting her hand back on a large rifle on some kind. All four figures were now sweeping their weapons' aims over the witches peeking out at them.

Something caught Rosalie's attention. Struggling underneath the knee of one of the armored figures was-

"Kunika!" Isaac shouted as she caught sight of the Fusoan girl. She

raised her shotgun at the armored figure restraining her friend and racked the pump back with a menacing _cha-chak_. "Let her go, you bastard!"

As Rosalie started to raise her own pistol and began to open her mouth to tell the armored figures to surrender, one of them looked around at her girls emerging from their rooms before pulled out a dark grey, spherical object from a pocket and pressed a button on it. Her instincts immediately screamed "Grenade!" at the sight of it.

'_Is he mad?! It'd be suicide to use a grenade in such a confined space!'

"Screecher out!" the figure shouted before tossing it.

Rosalie watched in horrified fascination as the sphere rolled along the carpeted floor, emitting a whine that quickly built up in volume.

'_Shit, he _is _insane!'_ she thought frantically. "Take cover!"

She saw her girls following her orders, ducking back around the cover of the plaster-covered stone walls or raising their shields.

All except one.

Rosalie watched as Isaac dashed out from the doorway screaming, "Let her go now!" at the armored figure still planting a knee on Kunika and raising her shotgun up. The figure then opened fire with its large gun. Each bullet fired so quickly that it all blended together as a continuous, off-key buzzsaw whir. However, just as quickly as the fire began, it ended suddenly with the clack of the chamber hitting empty.

"_Kuso!_" the figure swore in a high-pitched voice, clearly that of a girl.

Even as the figure dropped the drum magazine of its machine gun (for what else could it have been) and reached for another, Isaac reacted quickly. Taking advantage of the lapse of fire, she swung her shotgun up and pulled the trigger. The spray of buckshot smashed into the figure, or rather, it smashed into a golden-colored, body-conforming shield, for lack of a better word, and knocked the figure over.

Before Isaac could get off another shot though, one of the other figures dashed in front of the downed figure levering herself up. It raised its left arm and pressed something on a device there, and instantly a blueish, circular shield sprang up, crackling with energy. It looked disturbingly similar to a witch's shield save for the lack of runes and symbols on it. And the strange device generating it, of course.

The figure then raised its rifle and fired at Isaac, forcing her to cease her attack and raise her shield. Each pull of the trigger emitted a short, rapid _brrap_ of fire, likely indicating the long tube at the end of the barrel was a silencer as well. As the rifle clicked on empty, another one of the armored figures kept up the fire, keeping Isaac from launching any more attacks.

As the armored figures backed off with that blue shield still up and still firing, Rosalie suddenly felt a sharp yank on her coat collar and was pulled behind the stone walls of the room. "Are you crazy?! Get to cover!" she heard Geena shout. The last thing she saw before being dragged behind the wall was Isaac diving on top of Kunika.

Then it happened.

Rosalie expected to hear the thunderclap of a fragmentation grenade going off. Instead, what sounded like the wail of a thousand banshees resounded through the air. The noise was so great, she couldn't even hear her own screams or that of Geena's and her subordinates as they feebly tried to match the screech coming from that "grenade".

With both hands jammed against her battered ears, Rosalie managed to get up and stagger towards the door. When she peeked out, she saw that the four armored figures were now already in the distance, running away as fast as their legs can carry them. Isaac was still on top of Kunika and both of them appeared to be screaming, though it was impossible to tell with the cacophony surrounding them. Her gaze then turned to the small sphere still emitting its ear-piercing screech, still painful even through her hands.

Forcing herself to step closer to the source of that terrible noise, she managed to get next to it before rearing her leg back and kicking the "grenade". It flew quite a distance away down the corridor, mitigating some of the terrible screeching through virtue of distance.

This allowed Rosalie to free her hands from her ears. Quickly taking up a two-handed shooting stance, she took aim at the small sphere and fired a quick double tap. The two 9mm rounds blew a pair of neat, round holes in the sphere that terminated in sprays of bits of metal out the other side. The banshee wail slowly winded down and died as the "grenade" sparked and hissed in its death throes.

Rosalie breathed a sigh of relief as the assault on her senses ended, though there was still a faint ringing in her ears, and turned back to her subordinates, specifically Kunika, who was being helped up by a very concerned Isaac.

"Ms. Kunika, are you uninjured?" Rosalie asked once the girl in question was back on her feet.

Kunika tapped herself on her head a couple times before responding. "I'm okay! There's this weird ringing in my ears and I think I'm a little deaf on one side, but other than that, I'm fine!" she replied cheerfully.

Rosalie smiled at her with a mixture of relief and bemusement. _'I'd thought only a Britannian could say that with a straight face. I suppose I'll have to add Fusoans to that list as well.'_

Out loud, she said, "I'm glad to hear that, Ms. Kunika." She then turned back to see Marian talking to Adriana while rapping on her head as if to dislodge something from her ears. The Romagnan witch appeared to be teasing the girl, but it was a very gentle teasing that she used when she was truly concerned about someone. "Now, are

you alright, Ms. Marian? You were fairly close to thatâ€|grenade when it went off," Rosalie asked, interrupting the banter.

Marian shook her head a few times before answering. "Yeah, I guess. Fuck, that hurt! I swear, when I catch those guys, I'm gonna shove those weird guns they got up their asses and-"

"Ms. Marian," Rosalie said firmly, interrupting the Liberion witch's rant. "I need you to calm down for a moment and tell me what just happened. Who were thoseâ€|people?"

Marian started and smacked her forehead. "Aw shit, now I remember! Commander, Major Wittgenstein hasn't reported back in over an hour. Neither her nor Jennifer are responding to radio calls either."

Rosalie's eyes widened for a moment in shock before her brows furrowed in worry. "Organize a search. Get night witches to search their last known lo-"

"Already done. I've got the radio operators already asking the night witches' radio network for their last known coordinates and asking them to assist in the search."

Rosalie nodded in approval at Marian's professionalism and initiative. "Good work. Now though, what can you tell me about those intruders just now? It looked like you were the first one to run into them."

"Well, technically it was Kuroda who ran into them, but get your point." Marian straightened up and began to rattle off her report. "I was heading over to your room to alert you to what I said when I heard something that sounded like muffled screaming. I took a peek using this handy little thing here-" She took out a small mirror from one of her pockets and waved it around. "-and I saw Kunika down on the floor with two of those weird armored guys standing over her. I took out my sidearm and I was ordering them to surrender when that one guy opened up on me. I managed to get a shot off before I had to put my shield up, but-" She shook her head before continuing. "Wing Commander, that guy had a shield."

All the witches present were silent for a moment.

"Wait, are you telling me those _cazzi_ were witches?" Adriana asked incredulously.

Marian shook her head. "No, I don't think so. That shield didn't look like any shield I've ever seen before. It was golden-colored and it wrapped around the guy's body like a second skin when I shot him. Plus, there were no runes or symbols on the shield. None. At all. That shouldn't be possible if it was made using magic. Then there were those two behind the first guys. It was like they were invisible up until I shot that dinosaur-looking one and that other one opened fire with that freakin' raygun-"

Rosalie held up a hand to for Marian to stop as her ear radio crackled to life. **"Commander, what happened?! We heard gunfire and-"**

"Sergeant Cormack, we have intruders in the base. There are four

individuals. All of them are dressed in black armor and are trying to escape the base. Cut them off and apprehend them, but be careful. They are armed with strange weapons and aren't hesitant about using them. If they resist, you have permission to open fire on them." She said that last part bitterly, unused as she was to giving orders to kill other humans. "And if you do have to fire on them, be advised that the intruders have some kind of shield."

Silence followed that bit of news. Rosalie could almost imagine the stunned expression on the sergeant's face. **"Does that mean the intruders are witches, ma'am?"** Sgt Cormack asked incredulously.

"Unlikely, though it's possible. In any case, please proceed with caution when apprehending them."

"**Roger, ma'am. We're moving now.**"

Immediately afterwards, the base's alarm went off. The loud, blaring cry of an air raid siren filled the air, yet even that noise was sheer relief to the 506th's battered ears.

Suddenly, there was a burst of static in Rosalie's ear. **"Hey, commander! What's going on? Why's the alarm ringing?"** came the frantic voice of Carla Luksic.

"Ms. Carla, intruders have penetrated the base and are currently on the run. We need your help in capturing them."

"**What?! How? There's guards everywhere! How did no one see them?"**

"That's what we're going to ask them when we capture them."

"**Shit. You girls might need some striker support for this. I'll go prep Lucky Girl for launch. Just call me when you need me!"**

"Will do, Ms. Carla. Over and out."

Rosalie then turned her attention back to her subordinates. "Everyone, we need to assist in apprehending those intruders. With the weapons they have at their disposal, it's more than likely they'll be able to overpower any individual guards trying to stop them. To successfully stop them, we'll have to coordinate with the guards to intercept them as they try to escape, so equip your radios. Ms. Kunika, Ms. Marian, I'll hear the rest of what happened on the way, alright?" The two witches nodded at her. "Very well then, let's move o-"

"Uh, Wing Commander? I think you forgot something." Adriana pointed out with a crooked smile.

Rosalie blinked in confusion. She has her weapon and her radio equipment. What could she be forgetting? "What is it?" she asked finally.

Adriana's smile got even more crooked at that. "Doesn't it feel a little, ah, chilly down there?"

Rosalie blinked again. "Chilly?" She then looked down and realized

something: she was wearing only her coat and nothing else. The other witches, previously too concentrated on the issue of the intruders to notice, now did as well.

Rosalie's face turned a light shade of pink as she now realized it was indeed very chilly.

She then heard a cough from behind her and turned to see Geena, fully dressed in her US Army Air Force uniform. One hand held a M1 Garand rifle, the other held Rosalie's bra and pants, a pair of white stockings, and a pair of black boots. She held the latter out to Rosalie, considering how useful the former would've been at preserving what was left of Rosalie's modesty. "You rang, love?" she asked wryly.

The blush on Rosalie's face darkened to a nice shade of red. "Thank you, Geena," she managed to say with as much dignity and grace as she could muster as she took the offered clothes and began to what one was supposed to do with them when mostly nude.

The other witches looked back and forth between their commanders as the revelation sank in.

"Wait, you mean you and she are, are, areâ€¦" Marian stammered as her own blush developed quite nicely.

"Looks like it," Isaac said neutrally, though the light shade of pink on her face betrayed her true feelings on this matter.

"Oh, you two are girlfriends? I'm so happy for you!" Kunika gushed.

By now, Adriana's grin was of Cheshire cat proportions. "You two have got to tell me all about how you got together when this is all over."

As Rosalie finished dressing, she cleared her throat and willed herself into back into commander mode. "Alright, that's enough of this. Girls." The tone in her voice made everyone stand up straight and pay attention. "There are intruders in the base. They've somehow penetrated security without alerting a single sentry. They've assaulted one of us and attacked us with firearms and who knows what else in our own home. We have to capture them and find out whoâ€¦or whatâ€¦they are, and why they're here. Now let's go."

* * *

><p>Meanwhile, running back along their infiltration routeâ€¦

"What the hell was that?!" Taiga shouted incredulously over the blaring of an alarm. "Did that girl have a point defense gauntlet on?! What the fuck are people doing with energy shields in World War-Freaking-Two?"

"Why are you asking me?!" Tak shouted back. "I know just about as much as you do on this! And for the record, that was not a shield generated from a point defense gauntlet! I've never seen one with all those strange writings on it like that one had and that human chick did not have anything on her arms to suggest she had anything like

a gauntlet!"

"And also, what was with the fucking ears and tail?! She had big, triangle _ears_ that popped out the top of her head and this big fluffy tail that popped out her ass when that energy shield went up! What! The! Fuck?!"

"Again, why are you asking me?! I may have the edge in intelligence on you, but I'm not omniscient!"

"You two, less arguing and more running!" Jakob snapped. The two disputers immediately clammed up as Jakob turned to his team's sniper. "Sar, what part of 'no killing' did you not understand?"

"See shield, use plasma pistol. Should had overload shield. Why no overload?" she muttered to herself.

Jakob gritted his teeth as he thought about it. She was technically in the right, but still. Orders were orders, and Sar had disobeyed hers. "Next time, no plasma pistol. Nothing lethal. I do not want to have the charred pieces of a little girl splattered over the walls if your shot penetrates. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," she replied a bit reproachfully.

"Yes, sir, what?" Jakob said.

"Nothing lethal, sir!" Sar repeated.

"Okay then." Jakob turned to the others as they ran. "Vanguard, now that we've triggered the alarm we're going loud. Take off your suppressors. The increase in accuracy should make up for the loss of stealth, and suppressed weapons have a distinct noise profile anyway. Unsuppressed gunfire should actually be more difficult to track this time if everyone's gunning for us."

He watched as Taiga began to hastily unscrew her SAW's suppressor to replace it with its original flash suppressor, while Tak reached for his Carbine's velocity setter to dial it back up to a more usable muzzle velocity. As he reached over to his MA5F's barrel to unscrew his own suppressor, Jakob continued his barrage of orders.

"Next, we'll assume delta formation to punch through any group of guards we run into. Tak, take point with your PD gauntlet. I want you acting as a shield wall to intercept any fire."

"Got it!" the T'vaoan Kig-Yar dashed in front of the team before pressing a button on the little device on his left arm. Immediately, a large, circular energy shield sprang to life in front of him; its blueish, translucent surface crackling with energy.

"Sar, take up position just behind Tak. You two will be our spearhead. Shoot anyone you see coming at you."

"Taiga, you and I will take the sides of the delta. Shoot anyone trying to get around the shield wall, but avoid the face. TTRs may be made of paint, but a paint blob travelling at Mach 5 will still put out someone's eye if it hits them there. Aim for center of mass."

"You should take your own advice,
I-Keep-Shooting-People-In-The-Face-And-Legs-_san_!" Taiga
taunted.

"That was only in that one battle! And a little bit in the next too
but, arggh! Just carry out the plan and get to the roof for
extraction."

"Not tower?" Sar asked.

"No way. The Yanme'e may have been stealthy, but they're sure as hell
not tough or speedy, at least not carrying us they aren't. They'd get
shot down the moment these guys decide to break out the AA guns.
We'll need something tougher if we want to bug out alright. Shit,
that reminds me." He quickly established a commlink to a certain
Yanme'e Ultra waiting for him on the tower. "Tizzkitty, we've tripped
the alarm."

"**This soldier is aware of that fact due to the sounding of the
alarm which has compromised the stealth of this mission.**"

"Great! I mean, not so great! Tell command about this and get them to
send a Pelican to extract us, 'cause I don't think we're getting out
the same way we got in!"

"**This soldier has understood and will comply with the orders of
wing commander Brrzzm'kh'kh which is the only method by which this
mission can still be salvaged/recovered.**"

Jakob closed the commlink just as a group of soldiers rushed out a
side corridor and stood in their path. There were four of them in
total. Two wore the grey uniforms of the German Wehrmacht and were
carrying MP 40s, while one wore the dull green uniform of a US Army
soldier and carried a M3 "Grease Gun" submachine gun. The leader wore
the brown uniform and peaked cap of a British officer and was
carrying a Sten submachine gun.

The officer's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of Vanguard.
Clearly, he hadn't been expecting to see them there. "Stop ri-"

That officer, unfortunately, never finished that sentence. He
instead, stopped to stare at a red splotch on his chestâ€"courtesy of
Sar and her BR105â€"for a few seconds before the Hyberzine in the
paint took hold and he crumpled to the ground in a heap. The other
three soldiers suffered the same fate. One of the Germans managed to
get off a burst from his MP40, but they all bounced off Tak's point
defense gauntlet to embed themselves in the walls, floors, and
ceiling.

Team Vanguard got past the crumpled bodies by the simple action of
leaping over them before continuing their run.

"_Kuso_, that was too easy. Couldn't they have put up more of a
fight?" Taiga muttered.

"Hesitate too much," Sar noted. "No shoot people before. Like green
recruits."

"This is supposed to be a forward base, is it not?" Tak wondered.

"Why should these humans put fresh recruits in a base this close to what I presume to be their front lines? It doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't matter," Jakob concluded. "If they keep sending recruits after us, then it's just going to make our escape that much more easier."

"So why can't just bust out the front door?" Taiga asked. "Personally, I want to try stealing one of those tanks and busting out the gate with it." Jakob could almost see the grin underneath her helmet. "It'll be like one of those WWII holos. Nothing could stop us."

"Yeeeah, no. We are not going to do that. Even if by whatever miracle all of them are recruits, they still outnumber us by about 50 to 1. Even if we had the TTRs to take everyone out, we'd still eventually get swarmed by sheer numbers. We're just going to head to the roof and hold out there until that Pelican arrives."

"_Tch!_ You're no fun," Taiga grumbled.

"One more thing though. Everyone, watch out for more of those girls."

He frowned in contemplation at he remembered that blonde girl with the M1911. That one shot she got off had struck him on his right arm. The girl had apparently been trying to disable him rather than kill him, so that was an interesting point. But the one part which had bothered him was that when that round had struck, it took off a bigger portion of his shield bar than he'd expected.

Granted, it had been still a miniscule amount of the overall total that'd been depleted, but there was no way that a single .45 ACP round should be able to do that much damage. It didn't make sense no matter how he worked it.

And it wasn't even counting that weird energy shield that girl had brought up and had thrown his whole notion of WWII completely out of whack. Jakob could practically see his history teachers tearing their hairs off about how that shouldn't be possible, and then there was how it resisted an overcharged plasma pistol shot. The supersonic bolt of fusion-temperature gas combined with the EMP should have been enough to take it down. Certainly, no UNSC-built energy shield that could still be carried comfortably by infantry—“even powered armor-equipped infantry—“could've withstood that. And yet somehow, that girl's energy shield did, and without even flickering to boot.

Improbably located energy shields with impossibly powerful energy sources powering it wielded by teenage girls. Something like that would've been enough to drive the average person gibbering mad.

But Jakob was a UNSC Marine, and Marines are several cuts above the average person. So bring on the weirdness, bring on the absurdity, and bring on the impossible; because the impossible are what the Marines are for. It just took a little longer than normal.

"Indeed," Tak agreed. "Those human females have far more powerful weaponry than normal. We should definitely exercise more caution

around them."

Jakob blinked in surprise. "No, they're not. That girl just had a Colt M1911. While powerful for its time, it shouldn't have the muzzle velocity to penetrate our armor."

"Then explain the dimple on my armor."

Now Jakob was truly surprised. "Where?"

"Right breastplate. That human chick managed to shoot me before my shields could go up."

Jakob ran over to Tak's right side to examine said area. Sure enough, there was a small dimple on that part of the armor about the right size for a .45 ACP round. "Shit, that shouldn't have happened. How bad does it hurt?"

"Not a lot. The impact gel [1] really did its job, but it still felt like someone punched me there. Hard."

Jakob shook his head in disbelief. The GRAM's armor was supposed to be able to stop 7.62x51mm HVAP. How the hell did .45 ACP make a dimple in that armor? Then he remembered the round that took off more of his shield bar than it should have.

This world was not only getting more and more screwy, it was also getting more and more dangerous too.

"If we encounter anyone else with energy shields, we're going to need a better plan of attack to deal with them," Jakob decided.

"And I'll assume that you actually have one to back up your boast?" Tak asked tartly.

"Yeah. Run."

Taiga scowled underneath her helmet. "Seriously? Run? Like hell I'm going to run from a couple of teenage girls!"

"You mean like the teenage girl that knocked you down with a single 12-gauge shotgun shell?" Tak asked pointedly. "I'm assuming that it drained more of your energy shield than it should have, just like how that antiquated pistol round did more damage than it should have. Am I right?"

Taiga grumbled something that sounded vaguely like a "_Hai_". "You have a point, but--"

"Look," Jakob said sternly, interrupting whatever objection Taiga had been about to raise. "These are teenage girls that can apparently generate energy shields without any obvious equipment, never mind how ridiculous energy shields would be in WWII; weapons that for some reason are a lot more powerful than they should be, and, of course, freakin' animal ears and tails that they can apparently pop in and out at will. I wouldn't be surprised if they stared firing lasers out of their eyes by this point."

"Or out of boob?" Sar asked out of the blue.

"Ye-what?" Jakob said, doing a double take at the apparent non sequitur. "Never mind, the point is that facing a complete unknown without any intel whatsoever is idiotic and likely to get us all killed. Like those Marines who opened that chamber on Alpha Halo.

This time, everyone else nodded grimly. What happened to those men and women was worse than death itself. Indeed, death would've been preferable.

"So if we face those girls again, we run. Got it? Good. Now let's get moving, double time!"

* * *

><p>On Team Vanguard's trailâ€|

"And that should be it. I don't think there's anything else me or Kunika can say about them," Marian concluded, with Kunika nodding in assent.

Rosalie and the rest of the 506th running alongside herâ€"which currently consisted of Geena, Marian, Kunika, Adriana, and Isaacâ€"digested the information the two had given them as they chased after the intruders, following the directions of Kunika as she used her magic ability to track their movements. Given that they were moving as a four-man unit, it was actually a pretty easy job.

From the information given by the briefing, Rosalie was able to conclude several things about the intruders. One of them was the nature of their strange weapons, which mostly turned out to be not as unfamiliar as she thought.

First of all, the weapon used by Mr. Leaderâ€"the nickname Rosalie had given him due to his obviously male voice despite the distortion caused by the gas mask and how he appeared to have been directing the othersâ€"appeared to be some sort of automatic rifle or carbine about the size of a Liberator M1A1 Thompson submachine gun. It clearly fed from a detachable box magazine that was, interestingly enough, loaded from behind the trigger group. Rosalie could see how such a configuration would minimize the weapon's size to make it easier to use indoors and make it easier to carry, while maximizing barrel length to increase range and accuracy. Kunika had also reported there was some kind of wide-barreled weapon underneath the rifle's barrel that resembled one of Fuso's grenade dischargers. If it was indeed a grenade discharger or something similar, Rosalie could easily imagine the amount of firepower it could give an individual soldier. She made a note to warn the guards of that later.

Then there was the weapon used by Ms. Fuso, whom Kunika had nicknamed due to hearing her use a Fusoan term for millimeter and because her high-pitched voice made her seem female. It appeared to be an automatic weapon about the size of a M1918 Browning Automatic Rifle according to Marian, though Kunika disagreed and insisted it was more around the size of a MG42. The one thing they both agreed on though was that it was some sort of bipod-equipped light machine gun with a high rate of fire and that it appeared to feed from a drum magazine. Personally, Rosalie thought it was a chancy proposition due to the tendency of drum magazines to misfeed, but there was no accounting for other people's weapon designs.

Dinoâ€"the nickname they'd decided to call it since they couldn't describe it as anything elseâ€"appeared to have wielded a magazine-fed, long-barreled rifle about the length of a M1919A6 machine gun that appeared to be capable of only being fired semiautomatically. The weapon had an unusual curved design and appeared to eject the magazine upon depletion similar to the M1 Garand's action; yet the weapon's bizarre appearance paled in comparison to its wielder. Marian mentioned that it looked a bit like the fossilized skeleton of a Velociraptor she'd seen once in an exhibit in the Liberion Museum of Natural History, but much larger, standing much more upright, and lacking a tailâ€"and of course, being alive and not a fossilized skeleton. Rosalie knew that it must be intelligent since it was wearing armor, using firearms, and working together with the three others, yet she could not figure out what it was doing here of all places and how it came to have a shield.

'_The last time I checked, dinosaurs weren't part of anyone's witch corps,'_ Marian had snarked when Rosalie had voiced her thoughts aloud.

Finally, there was the one Geena nicknamed Buck, after her favorite science fiction comic hero, due to Buck's weapon. That was perhaps the only truly unknown weapon the intruders used, since none of the witches for the life of them could figure out how a gun that fired bolts of green light worked. Geena suggested they just call it a raygun and leave it at that until they could examine the weapon more closely. Rosalie had no objection to that. Indeed, it rolled off the tongue much better than Viperhead pistol (her suggestion). Next to the impressive light show the raygun put out, the regular muzzle flashes of the Garand-sized rifle the figure fired afterwards was almost disappointing.

And those were just the weapons they'd seen them using. Both Kunika and Marian had confirmed that each one had an additional weapon attached to their backs in addition to sidearms and assorted grenades. There was also the possibility of the intruders using more of the grenade-like weaponry Mr. Leader had used to cover his team's escape. Rosalie had taken a brief moment to grab the remains of the device for further study. Closer examination had revealed that it was covered with small grills on all sides. Marian had speculated they were miniature loudspeakers for projecting that awful noise before Adriana had started teasing her about being a geek, at which point it dissolved into a back and forth argument between the two resembling something that should've belonged in a school playground before Rosalie managed to put an end to the silliness with a sharp word to both of them.

In addition, despite firing some dozens of rounds, not a single brass casing was found at the scene. Both Marian and Kunika also reported that none of the firearms the intruders were using had ejected any spent cartridges period, let alone brass ones. Isaac had speculated that the firearms used some kind of combustible casing that burned along with the powder or even used ammunition that dispensed with the casing entirely. She and Marian had gotten into a heated discussion on how that was possible before Rosalie brought them back on track with the briefing.

All in all, it was quite a bit of information, but it also raised far more questions than it answered. Rosalie hoped that those intruders

would be able to fill in the blanks once they captured them.

Then suddenly, she heard a staccato burst of fire from a MP 40 that was quickly cut off with a sudden silence.

Her ear radio crackled. ****"Wing Commander, we lost contact with one of the patrol teams in the building!"****

Rosalie mouth tightened in combination worry and anger. "Let me guess: they're on our floor."

****"Yeah. It sounded like they made contact with the intruders."****

"Roger that. We'll investigate." She motioned to the other witches. "This way."

They headed towards the sound of the gunfire. It wasn't long before they encountered the crumpled bodies of the patrol. Their looked unnaturally pale, as if all the blood had been drained from them and their eyes were shut tight. None of them looked as if they were breathing.

"_Cazzo!_" Adriana swore angrily. "Don't tell meâ€|"

"Check the bodies!" Rosalie shouted.

Everyone rushed over and began checking their pulses.

"Shit, I'm not getting a pulse!" Marian swore.

"_Niente!_" Adriana said angrily. "There's no pulse!"

"Nothing here either," Isaac said quietly.

Rosalie stared at the bodies, her anger building up with each second at the deaths of her men-

"_Matte!_" Kunika shouted. "This man has a pulse!"

Rosalie stood shocked before rushing over to the Karlsland soldier Kunika was checking. "Are you sure?"

Kunika frowned in concentration. "Wait, there's nothing now. I know I felt the pulse, but-"

"Wait, this one has a pulse too," Isaac reported before frowning slightly. "Now there's nothing though. It's like their heartbeat has slowed down to a really low rate. Give me a minute and I can figure out how much."

"No. No, that's okay. All that matters is that they're alive," Rosalie said with a relieved tone. "But still, what could be causing this?" she wondered to herself, until she noticed the red splotches on the man's uniform. As she watched it, the splotches grew smaller and smaller.

"Noticed those too?" Isaac asked.

"Any idea what those are?"

"Hmm. Assuming it's paint bullets they're shooting, maybe there's some kind of tranquilizer mixed into the paint? But then how would they calculate the doses to avoid a fatal overdose? And what kind of tranquilizer can even put someone into an apparent coma like this?" Isaac mused.

Just then, Rosalie's ear radio crackled to life again. **"Wing Commander, we've got a patrol team reporting they've made contact with the intruders!"**

"Patch me through!" Rosalie then heard the sound of orders being shouted and gunfire playing in the background. "This is Wing Commander de Grunne, where are you?"

"_Oberstleutnant!_ We're engaging the intruders on the 6th floor, north wing!"

Rosalie wasn't sure which part surprised her more: the fact that the intruders were apparently heading up instead of down as logic dictated, or the fact that they had ascended two floors so quickly. She did not like the chain of surprises she was getting. "Can you keep them pinned down until we get there?"

More automatic gunfire chattered for a while before the soldier could answer. **"_Nein_, we've got our hands full just trying to keep from getting shot! I've got a man down already! A shot just grazed him on the shoulder and then he collapses a few minutes later!"** The soldier's voice cut off as Rosalie heard more gunfire and then what sounded like wet splattering sounds on stone. **"_Scheiß_, that was too close! Forget it! One of those intruders have some kind of circular shield he's wearing on the arm and every bullet that gets through that to hit the others just bounces off some kind of golden shield that flares up when the bullets hit. Not only that, but these intruders are a _lot_ faster than what someone should be able to run! We need reinforcements just to make them keep their heads down, let alone capturing them!"**

"Don't worry," Rosalie responded. "You'll be getting those reinforcements. I'll make sure of it. Just keep your head down and try not to get shot."

"You don't have to tell me that!" the soldier laughed. **"Just get those reinforcements, out!"**

Rosalie nodded automatically before switching frequencies. "Sergeant Cormack, I need you to tell all patrols at and above the 6th floor to fortify intersections and trap the intruders. Use anything and everything they can find. Furniture, doors, anything. Send all other patrols to reinforce them. Also, please warn the guards that one of them may have some kind of grenade discharger and that they may be attacked by unknown weaponry."

"Shit. That's a little too vague for my tastes. Exactly what do you expect us to watch out for if we don't even _know_ what to watch for?"

"I wish I could tell you that, but even I'm not sure what to watch for. All I know is that the earlier screeching was from some kind of

grenade-like weapon that emitted the sound from what appeared to be miniature loudspeakers. Expect strange weapons like that to be used against you. Also, tell the men outside to guard the doorways and watch the windows for any other escape attempt."

"**The windows, ma'am?" **Sgt Cormack asked incredulously. "**You expect them to jump out or what?"**

"At this moment, I'm not sure what to expect from these intruders. I'd rather be take this precaution against them and have it turn out to be unneeded than to not be prepared and get with our pants down, figuratively speaking."

"**Alright, then. One more thing though, how exactly do you expect us to know which intersections to fortify? From what I've been hearing, these sons of bitches are moving faster than a greased hog on a hockey field."**

Rosalie smiled before nodding to a certain Fusoan girl. "Contact Flying Officer Kuroda. Her ability should allow you to track their movements and deploy your forces accordingly."

She could almost see the grin on that grizzled Sergeant's face. "**Understood, ma'am!"**

As Kunika turned to the task of directing the guards to where they were needed, Rosalie pondered a question that had been sticking in her head. "Why go up? If they were trying to escape, why would they head away from the most logical exit?"

"Unless they're planning on jumping from the 6th floor and living to tell about it, that is," Marian joked.

"I wonder though," Geena muttered.

Marian gave her CO a look that screamed "Are you right in the head?" "You don't really think they could do something like that, do you?" Marian asked incredulously.

Geena looked up from her musings. "Huh? No, not that. I'm wondering if they have something on one of the upper floors, or even the roof, they can use to escape."

Rosalie looked at her girlfriend with surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Well, let's assume for a moment that, despite the many inconsistencies with that theory, the intruders are indeed witches. How would you think they infiltrated the base in the first place?"

It took but a moment for Rosalie to come up with the answer. "A striker. But if that were the case, how did the sentries not see them coming or hear the sound of the engines running? Strikers are hardly the most silent of machines, you know."

"I've heard the Orussians' Polikarpovna Po-2s are whisper silent with their magic engines off, but you're right. It doesn't explain how no one saw them coming."

"Maybe they painted the strikers in night camouflage." Isaac suggested, making everyone turn to her. The Belgican witch merely shrugged in response. "It's possible they did just glide in using camouflaged strikers. A witch in a striker is a really small target for radar and the operators might've mistaken them for a flock of large birds. It'd be extremely difficult, but not impossible."

Rosalie nodded slowly as she thought about it. "It just might beâ€¦hold on. Maybe these intruders weren't as undetected as they thought." Rosalie dialed the frequency of her ear radio again. "North Tower sentry team, this is Wing Commander de Grunne. I'm wondering if you've seen or heard anything out of the ordinary before the alarm was sounded."

Seconds pass as she waited for their answer.

Rosalie frowned as none came. "North Tower sentry team, please respond, over."

Nothing but silence answered her.

* * *

><p>Meanwhile, on top of the north towerâ€¦

"â€¦**wer sentry team, please respond, over.**"

A Yanme'e Major named Aaa'zz't-152 waved her antennae in consternation and began emitting agitation pheromones in response to the stress as the radio continued speaking. "Commander, how would this soldier make the speech emitted by this primitive human communications device cease which would betray our position and condition if it does not cease?"

"Aaa'zzt't-152 will cease her attempts to cease the operation of the primitive human communications device which is called a 'rrr'zz'o'," answered Tzzz'kh't-79, unaware she'd mangled the pronunciation of "radio". "Either function or cessation of the operation of the [previous reference] will result in hostile soldiers investigating this area which would be undesirable."

"**I say again. North Tower sentry team, please respond, over,**" the radio squawked again.

"What action then should this wing perform/undertake with regards to the [previous reference]?" another Major, Ymm'klk't-122, asked.

Tzzz'kh't-79 thought for a few moments, antennae twitching as she ran the scenarios through her head and came to a decision. "This wing will do nothing with regards to the destruction of the [previous reference] which would accomplish nothing. This wing will instead abandon this position and maintain possession of the [previous reference]. This soldier will inform/notify the change in position to the wing commander Brrrm'zzi," Tzzz'kh't-79 concluded, still horribly mispronouncing Jakob's surname. The unfortunate lack of the necessary mouthparts only compounded the problem. "The Majors will gather their flights in preparation to perform/undertake this soldier's

orders."

The three Majors buzzed their assent before gathering the Minors under their command to carry out their commander's orders. Tzzz'kh't-79, meanwhile, leaned over to pick up the radio. She gave it a moment's gaze before stuffing it into a pocket.

Next, she activated her comms and opened a link to Jakob. "Wing commander Brmm'kiki, this soldier reports that we are unable to hold our current position and will have to abandon it"

"**Okay, are you mispronouncing my name on purpose here? Because you keep getting farther and farther away from the original.**"

"What is the meaning/purpose of this unrelated topic of conversation Brm'zz'ki is trying to start/begin?" Tzzz'kh't-79 asked irritably.

"**Never mind! So what about the Pelican? When the ETA?*"

"The Tf'err'ik'khm-" The closest she could come to pronouncing "Pelican". "-will be arriving in 22 minutes, 19 seconds according to command."

"**Shit. That long?*"

"Yes. '7 minutes until the Brmmb Kh'th clears the horizon and 15 minutes until the Tf'err'ik'khm arrives' was what command had said,"

"**Damn orbital mechanics. Not sure if we can-shit! Hold on!*" Tzzz'kh't-79 heard a series of loud reports from the humans' firearms over the commlink before Branley answered again. "**Okay, forget holding out for now! These guys have got us pinned down here. I don't know how, but it's like they can see where we're going as soon as we move. I don't think we can even make it to the roof like this.**"

Tzzz'kh't-79 clicked in consternation. She held herself perfectly still with insect-like stiffness as she thought about how to resolve this unforeseen problem; the only sign of life being an occasionally twitching antennae. Finally, after several moments of thought, she gave her answer. "This wing will support the escape by transporting the wing to the top of the human military hive. Come to the nearest window. This wing will provide transport."

"**Yeah, alright! Also, search those men we knocked out for a radio! They're somehow tracking our movements without a line-of-sight on us! I want to know how the hell they're doing it!*"

"This soldier reports that this solder has acquired the 'rrr'zz'o' and will carry out that task which should resolve this mystery," she said before closing the commlink.

By the time she was finished, the rest of her wing was standing at attention before her. Tzzz'kh't-79 chirped her satisfaction before speaking.

"Now this wing will climb down the tower of the human military hive instead of flying which has the possibility of alerting enemy

soldiers to the noise of flying. Execute the order." The last part was accompanied by a spray of a particular type of pheromone into the air, which basically said "Follow me".

And just like that, Tzzz'kh't-79 turned on her cloaking field, disappearing into nothingness as the field blocked all visible light from reaching her body with the sole exception of her eyes. The three pairs of yellow compound eyes bobbed in the air as she walked away. Her curled feet underneath her clicked on the stone floor as her right tarsus closed on the doorknob. She opened the door slightly, scenting the night air wafting in with her antennae for any sign of a nearby hostile. When no sign of any such hostile was detected, she quietly opened the door and dashed out, followed closely by her wing. The last one closed the door on her way out, leaving the comatose bodies of the two Hyberzined soldiers behind, and all was still once more.

* * *

><p>506***th**** JFW A-Unit HQ**

At the site of the first "massacre"â€|

Rosalie's brow furrowed as her radio greeted her with silence before she finally shut it off. She looked back to her girls. "Well, now we know where they got in, at least," she said to them with forced levity.

"I'm guessing I should send Luksic out for a little close-in recon?" Geena asked wryly.

"Please do."

As Geena gave her orders to Carla via ear radio, Rosalie turned to Kunika, who was still directing the guards to the appropriate positions. "Ms. Kunika, where are the intruders now and what is their status?"

"Hold on. Squad 21, they're coming at you from the west corridor! Squads 9 and 16, keep forcing them down the corridor! Squads 3 and 6, proceed along the corridor you're on and fortify the next intersection!" It was only then that she looked up at her commander. "I've got them boxed in by patrols on the 7th floor. It a few minutes, they won't be able to move from their position."

"Good. Lead us there. I want to have a chat with these intruders."

Kunika started for a moment before nodding. "_Hai_," she said before motioning for her commanding officer and fellow witches to follow.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Geena asked quietly. "What if they tried something while you're there?"

"No, I don't think they will," Rosalie replied firmly. "That device they used earlier was clearly meant to incapacitate, not kill. I think that goes for those paint bullets they used as well. They've had multiple opportunities where it would be easier and quicker to kill, yet they chose not to. It says something about their character,

and I would like to know more about why such people would choose to break into a fully manned Allied base in the first place."

Geena nodded in response. "Alright, then. Just know that if they try anything on you, I won't hold back on them."

At first, Rosalie wasn't sure how to respond. She knew Geena was a quiet, bookish sort and normally wasn't this willing to commit violence against people.

But then again, this wasn't a normal night either. She felt strangely touched by Geena's devotion, even though it might be a bit misdirected. So she smiled at her. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

* * *

><p>7**** floor of the unknown castle**

Jakob ducked back behind the overturned tables as a buzzsaw burst of MG42 fire chewed up the wall behind him. "Shit! Hey Taiga, are you ready to take back what you said about making this harder?"

"Hell, no!" She peeked out from behind a corner before ducking back as more fire chewed up the wall. "This is just getting interesting! Come on, you jerks! Come and get some!" she called to the WWII-era soldiers with an almost maniacal laugh.

Jakob swore and examined their situation. They were stuck in this fortified intersection with hostile soldiers firing at them from all sides. The men who'd been previously manning these defenses were now all lying on the floor, each one out cold from a dose of Hyberzine. Yet that was cold comfort considering their situation.

Somehow, whoever was directing those men had boxed them into this situation like holochess pieces on a board. The only thing that could explain that was a camera-based surveillance system, yet there had been no evidence of anything like that anywhere. Not to mention that CCTV cameras weren't even in widespread use by this time, though considering this world's screwed-up nature, nothing should come as a surprise to him. Even so, how the hell were they directing their forces like this?

Then an icon flashed on his TACPAD, indicating an incoming comm from Tzzz'kh't-79. "**Shall I let this one through?" **Kohime-1585 asked.

"Please do," Jakob replied. The insectoid face of the Yanme'e Ultra then appeared on the screen. "Tizzkitty, you find out how the hell they're tracking us?" Jakob asked before Tzzz'kh't-79 could say anything.

"**This soldier would have to answer in the affirmative and the negative," **she answered regretfully.

"What? Speak English."

"**According to the communications being made being on the 'rr'zz'o' there is a single human directing the hostile solders with great accuracy. The higher pitch of the voice of the [previous reference]

as well as the honorifics the soldiers are referring to [previous reference] by indicates the [previous reference] is female and is named 'Ffyy'mmg Off'zzz Kh'rr't' which is an odd/strange name that is extremely difficult to pronounce."**

Jakob couldn't even begin to decode what it was that the Yanme'e had mangled even if he had the time for it. For all he knew, the girl's name could be Finagle O'Fizzy Carrot. "So how is this girl tracking us?"

"**That is the problem. No communication has been made which reveals how the enemy soldier is tracking the wing of Brrmm'khkh."**

'_Okay, that was useless.'_

"**This soldier suggests Brrrm'kiii contemplate the problem after the escape has been performed," **she said irritably.** "Out."**

Jakob decided she was right and turned his attention back on how to escape this predicament they've been boxed into. They could always try forcing their way through the guards and make a beeline for the window, but then they'd come under attack as soon as they try to escape.

Plus, there was another problem.

"Guys, ammo check. How many TTRs you got?"

"I got 52 rounds left in this drum," Taiga reported. "After that, it's HVAP the rest of the way."

"I have 6 rounds in this mag," Sar reported. "Have one more full, then just bullets."

"I've just reloaded a fresh magazine in mine," Tak stated calmly. "And I have 3 rounds left in another. The rest, well, you can guess what the rest of the magazines contain."

Jakob nodded grimly. He himself had 30 rounds in this magazine and one with just 2 rounds left in it before he ran out of the paint bullets. Technically, he had a lot more in the form of a hypospray [2] loaded with four full doses of Hyberzine, but unless the soldiers stood still and just him inject them on some exposed skin, it'd be mostly useless in a situation like this. And even if they, for some inconceivable reason, let him do that, he still had only enough for eighty doses if he really stretched it out. He mentally kicked himself for wasting all those rounds on that blonde girl with the energy shield, then mentally kicked himself again for not telling his team to stop wasting their fire when it was clearly ineffective. "Alright, everyone. This is probably unnecessary, but switch to semi-auto."

"We know," everyone else chorused.

"I like to think Sar and I are smart enough to know when to conserve ammo, thank you very much. Even the tiger here knows that," Tak added wryly.

"You realize that I can hear you, right?" Taiga said testily.

"Oh, I'm fully aware of that fact, thank you."

"You know," Jakob said as a burst of gunfire turned the table next to him into something resembling Swiss cheese. "If you guys would just focus all that energy on finding a way out of this predicament, maybe we could actually get something do--"

"We blow hole in ceiling," Sar said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Everyone stopped what they were arguing about and turned to the young Marine who'd made the suggestion.

"Could you elaborate?" Tak asked.

"Simple. Blow hole in ceiling, then jump to next floor. Easy."

Jakob thought about it. It sounded insane at first, but the more he contemplated the idea, the more sense it made. It was just another application of the mouse-holing principle only applied vertically, and despite the height of the jump they'd have to make, the GRAM's exoskeletal muscles combined with their other equipment should be more than enough to handle it.

"Alright, you have a go. Just one question though: how are you going to blow a hole in the ceiling? It looks pretty thick, and made of stone. I don't think your standard M9's going to cut it."

Sar responded by unclipping a large metal device from her belt. It was about the size of a small chest and had a centrally-mounted arming handle, a keypad located below it for security, and an adhesive pad on the back for ease of placing on any surface in almost any environment. Really, it was hard to know which was more redundant: the small sign proclaiming it to be a "Charge Demolition M168", or the equally as loud "EXPLOSIVE" written in block letters above it.

"Sar," Jakob said slowly. "If you use that to blow the ceiling, there won't be much of a ceiling left afterwards. In fact, there wouldn't much left of the floors above itâ€|or us for that matter."

"You stupid? No use all of it," Sar said irritably as she started to pry the casing open. "Use only little. That way, there small boom, not big one."

Jakob breathed a small sigh of relief, along with Taiga. The only two who didn't was Tak, who had seen Sar tinker with explosives before and mostly had faith in her, and of course Sar, who was too busy tinkering to sigh.

"By the way," Jakob began. "How long is this going to ta--"

"Hello there! Can you hear me?"

Jakob gave a start as the voice called out from one of the hallways. It was soft and feminine and was tinged with a British accent; something Jakob did not expect to hear in a military base in the 1940's.

"If you can hear me," the feminine voice continued after no reply was

forthcoming. "I would like to speak to your leader and ask a few questions."

Jakob went over the options in his head. He could just ignore the voice and let the silence build, yet he didn't really want to. His curiosity was far too aroused to let him stay silent and he wanted some info as well. Plus, talking would buy them some time for Sar to finish her preparations.

"All right, you've got my attention!" Jakob called back. "It'll depend on your question whether or not I answer it, though."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Tak asked. "You know we're supposed to keep info about our existence from these people, right?"

"Better than sitting here and twiddling our thumbs," Jakob replied to his second-in-command.

"Excellent, then," the voice called back. "How about we introduce ourselves for a start? Just so we'll all have names to go on."

"Sounds alright to me. Why don't you start and we'll work from there?"

"Very well. My name is Wing Commander Rosalie de Hemricourt de Grunne of the Belgican Luchtcomponent, currently under the temporary command of the Britannian Royal Air Force, and the commander of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing A-Unit, as well as the commander of this base."

Jakob's eyes widened in confusion and, frankly, shock. There were just so many things about that that made no sense at all.

"And while we're at it, I'll give you mine as well!" another voice called out. This one was huskier and slightly deeper than the first, but was still unmistakably feminine—and also British to boot. "The name's Lieutenant Colonel Geena Preddy. I'm part of the Liberion Army 328th Fighter Squadron under the 352nd Fighter Group, and commander of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing B-Unit. I hope you're not confused by the double commander bit. It's a bit messy, but you're just going to have to deal with it."

'_That's probably the least of what I'm confused by at this moment considering all the bombshells you're throwing at me,'_ he thought before he realized something. '_Wait a minute, did they say '506__th__ Joint Fighter Wing?_'_ He recalled the little scrap of fortune cookie paper still sitting folded up in his back pocket. '_Okaaay, that cannot be a coincidence. Something weird is going on.'_

"Well, aren't you going to introduce yourself as well, Mr. Leader? Or am I going to have to call you that for the rest of this conversation?" the first voice called out jokingly.

That shook him out of his reverie. "Sorry about that! Just caught me a little off guard. You can call me Lance Corporal Branley, by the way."

Jakob heard a bout of light laughter coming from around the corridor. "Not even a first name to go with that, Mr. Branley?"

"Sorry, that's classified! You're going to have to ask me something else! Something that doesn't force me to have to shoot you!" Jakob called back semi-flippantly.

Jakob then heard indignant cries from the corridor before the de Grunne person silenced them with a hush. All of them had sounded feminine.

"Hah! Very well then. How about this: we each take turns asking questions until both of us are satisfied. Is that alright with you?" the voice of de Grunne asked.

"Fair enough! How about you start?"

"Alright then. First off, would you mind telling me what you did to my men and if it is reversible?"

The voice that had formerly sounded as gentle as the spring turned hard and cold as the winter as she asked that question. Jakob could practically feel the anger in the voice. As a fellow officer, he understood all too well why this girl would be angry and it was then that he realized that this girl hadn't been kidding around when she'd said she was this base's commander. In some ways, that confirmation made the situation even stranger to him. While in others, it made it simpler.

"All of your men that we shot have been hit with paint bullets laced with Hyberzine," Jakob called back. "It's a chemical, or rather a cocktail of them, designed to induce a hibernation state in human beings similar to a coma. And to your second question: yes, it is reversible with the antidote. Just wait an hour before administering it, or there could be some really uncomfortable side-effects. Also, you could just wait about six to eight hours, depending on the subject's physical condition, for the Hyberzine to wear off. There won't be any side-effects other than disorientation due to waking up suddenly couple of hours later."

"And how do I know if I can trust you on this?" De Grunne's voice asked in that winter gale tone.

"Technically, you don't, considering we did sneak into your base and shoot a couple of people," Jakob replied. "But then again, I don't have any reason to lie. Not with you surrounding me, at least. So you can either take my word for it." He shrugged then, even though this de Grunne person wouldn't have been able to see him. "Or not. Your choice."

Several moments of oppressive silence passed before Jakob heard a sigh of relief come from the corridor. "Well, I suppose I have no choice but to take what you say as the truth, or the closest I'll get from you at this point." De Grunne's voice had returned to her previous gentleness and good humor. "Your comment though brings me to another point. Why _did_ you-"

"Nah-ah! You agreed we would take turns with asking our questions, not to mention that you technically asked two questions the first time, buuut I'll let it slide considering the nature of the questions

and count it as one."

"Fine, then. What is your question?"

Jakob had to think about that for a few moments. The problem wasn't that he couldn't think of a question. The problem was deciding which question he wanted answered the most. There were just so many things about this screwed-up place he wanted to ask this commander de Grunne.

In the end, he decided on one of the most baffling ones he had.

"Exactly what is a 'witch'? Is it a codeword for some kind of Allied weapon or something?"

Several moments passed by without an answer.

"Hello? You still there?"

"Are you an idiot or have you been living under a rock for the past couple of millennia?" a new voice called out scathingly. This one was somewhere in between de Grunne's and Preddey's voice in tone; not quite husky but not quite high-pitched either. Also, this voice spoke with a distinctly flat American accent, unlike the previous two British ones.

Jakob felt a surge of irritation at that remark. "Yeah, let's pretend I've been living under a rock. So what kind of a weapon is a 'witch' and why should I have known about it?"

He then heard some muttered conversation, all in feminine voices again, before de Grunne spoke again.

"Forgive me for repeating this, but how can you not know what a witch is?" she asked with confusion clearly evident in her voice.

Jakob could feel his irritation growing. "Look, just assume I know nothing about your worâ€¦country," he quickly corrected. "And give me a straight answer already. What is a witch and what kind of weapon is it?"

Several more moments of silence followed before de Grunne finally gave her answer.

"Mr. Branley, you seem to have made some false assumptions about the meaning of that word. Allow me to correct you: witches are not weapons. In short, witches are girls who have awakened to their magic and have been sought out by, and made a compact with, their familiar animals. Each witch possesses an ability unique to her, though other witches may possess similar abilities, and uses that power to benefit humanity. Now do you understand, Mr. Branley?"

Silence followed that explanation, this time on the part of Fireteam Vanguard. Words could not properly describe the shock and disbelief they felt. Jakob was still struggling to comprehend the absurd explanation he got. Tak's fanged mouth was gaping slightly inside his helmet and his mane feathers were twitching in disbelief at the affront to his world of logic and reason. Even Sar had ceased her work on her makeshift bomb out of pure shock and was now staring

intently in the direction of corridor de Grunne's voice had come from. Taiga wasâ€|

"Bullshit!" she yelled out in the direction of de Grunne.

A few more moments of silence passed before she got an answer. "What do you mean 'bullshit'?" the girl with the American accent yelled back disbelievingly. "What's so hard to understand about that? It made perfect sense!"

"Exactly what part of that made any fucking sense, _bakayarou?! " Taiga yelled back with just as much disbelief. "You expect us to believe some kind of plotline right out of some _manga?! I say it's fucking bullshit!"

"Like I said, what part of that is bullshit!" the American girl yelled back. "And what the fuck is a man-ga?!"

"Calm yourself," de Grunne's voice said soothingly before addressing Vanguard. "Now then, Missâ€|?"

Taiga looked to Jakob, who nodded at her to continue.

"Private First Class Daidouji," Taiga answered finally.

"Ms. Daidoji," de Grunne continued. Jakob could hear her slight mispronunciation of Taiga's surname. "You may choose to believe me or not, but I can assure you that what I have said is the complete and utter truth. Denying it will not make it false."

Silence reigned once more. Despite the absurd (and frankly, terrifying) implications of de Grunne's explanation before, it was the conviction of which she spoke of it that baffled and scared Team Vanguard more, as if she completely believed what she said to be, as she said, the "complete and utter truth".

"Your conviction is admirable, Ms. Grunne," Tak called to the corridor. "But it does not change the fact that, by our standards, your explanation sounds more like something out of folklore than what we would consider fact."

"I see," de Grunne replied after a brief hesitation. "And you might be?"

"Private First Class Jol, at your service," he replied politely. He then added, "Or not, in this case. It would be a bit awkward to carry out your orders, considering we are on opposite sides at this moment after all."

"I suppose it would be, Mr. Jol." Jakob could almost imagine the rueful grin on de Grunne's face as she said that. "I'll try not to issue you any orders to that end, if I can help it," she added cheekily.

"Now that is something I will appreciate, thank you," Tak replied just as cheekily.

"So what's with your voice?" Yet another feminine voice asked curiously. This one had a slightly lower pitch than the American and had a noticeable Italian accent to it.

Tak tilted his head in confusion out of habit. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your voice. It sounds like two pieces of sandpaper grinding against one another. Do you have that throat disease...what was it called again?"

Some muttered whispering could be heard from the corridor for a few moments.

"Ah, _si_. Laryngitis. That was it."

'_Oh, shit! His voice!_' Jakob thought frantically. '_It still has the Kig-Yar rasp to it!_'

Apparently, Tak came to the same conclusion. "Ah, indeed? Sorry to destroy your expectations, but that is what my voice actually sounds like."

"Tak, what are you doing?" Jakob asked frantically.

"Refuge in audacity, Jakob," the T'vaoan Kig-Yar answered smugly. "Refuge in audacity."

"I see," the Italian girl answered, though it was obvious she didn't.

"Well, I can safely say this conversation has gone on quite long enough," the husky British girl, Preddy, said suddenly. "Now let's get back to business. Why did you four infiltrate this base? What do you even want here?"

"Technically, that's still two questions," Jakob pointed out.

"Mr. Branley," de Grunne said sternly, again switching from her previously gentle voice. "I think the time for levity has come to an end now. You and your people have come in here and shot several men for an as-of-yet unknown purpose. Now, I'm glad that you didn't kill any of them, but it doesn't change the basic fact that you still shot them. So please answer the question. Why did you break into this base?"

Jakob pondered how he was going to give a plausible answer while still avoiding telling them the truth. Granted, the truth might actually be harder to believe than whatever lie he could come up with, but he still felt like he had to preserve the secrecy of the UNSC's existence here.

"We're -"

"Jakob. I finish," Sar said suddenly.

Jakob quickly glanced over to his team's sniper and the M168 she'd been tinkering with. He managed get a quick peek of the tinkered explosive, which contained but a mere dollop of the original block of explosives, before Sar snapped the casing back on.

"Now need distraction so I can put on ceiling," she said.

"Alright. I know just the thing." Jakob pulled out a small, cylindrical device that was labelled "Smoke, White" out of a pocket. "Now I wish I'd brought more Screechers along," he muttered.

Sar just shrugged. "Make do with what you got."

Jakob smiled behind his helmet. "Hey, you said that perfectly this time. Nice."

"Thanks," she replied happily. "I like that, so memorize."

"Well, Mr. Branley?" de Grunne called out from the corridor. "What is your answer?"

"My answer is-" He pulled the pin. "-hold your breath."

Then he tossed it.

* * *

><p>On the 506***th*** JFW's side of the encounterâ€|**

'_Hold your breath? '_

Then Rosalie's eyes widened in realization. "Everyone! Gas masks o-"

A pop echoed around the corridors for a moment before billowing white smoke swept around the corner and blanketed everything in a choking haze. The sound of coughing and hacking filled the air like the smoke as everyone tried to clear their throat and lungs of the foul acridness.

"Shit! I can't see anything through this!" she heard Marian shout.

"Are they trying to break out?!" Adriana asked.

"_Iie!_" Kunika replied. "They're just standing thereâ€|no, wait. They're lying down and one of them is-"

Then suddenly, Rosalie heard a thump from around the corridor; like metal hitting stone.

Then her blood chilled as she heard a female voice cry, "Fire in the hole!" from around the corner.

Rosalie was quick to act. "Take cov-"

An explosive roar then blotted out whatever she was trying to shout.

* * *

><p>Back on Vanguard's side of the encounterâ€|

The detonation of Sar's on-the-spot IED was intense, though not as intense as the full version. The shockwave from the blast blew away the smoke only to replace it with a cloud of dust and debris.

Thanks to their GRAM armor and energy shields, as well as lying down when Sar's IED went off, Team Vanguard was able to ride out the explosion with minimal discomfort. When they felt the pressure from the shockwave pass them, they quickly got back on their feet and looked up at Sar's handiwork.

Sar's IED had, as planned, blown a hole in the ceiling courtesy of the metal plate on the back of the M168 and the explosives contained within. Then the plate plus explosives had gone through the ceiling above it, then the ceiling above that before finally smashing through the roof. The castle now sported a new skylight reaching from the 7th floor to the roof and measuring about two meters in diameter from the initial breach to the nearly five meter hole in the roof; free of charge.

"Wow," was all Taiga had to say.

"Alright, everyone! Through the hole. We're Oscar Mike." Jakob ordered. "Sar, Tak, take point."

They both nodded and looked back up at the hole. With cat-like grace, Sar leapt up and grabbed the edge of the hole before quickly pulling herself up, barely needing to use any of the enhanced strength the GRAM's exoskeleton provided her.

'_I guess being raised by Kig-Yar has its perks,'_ Jakob thought. '_Especially if they're _T'vaoan_ Kig-Yar.'_

Tak followed right on her trail. Jakob didn't think he even needed the exoskeleton for that piddly little jump (for him anyway).

"Area clear," Sar reported.

"I concur. Go up," Tak said quickly.

Unfortunately for Jakob and Taiga, due to being more or less normal humans, they couldn't make the jump using just their muscle power. Fortunately, they didn't have to. Using their GRAM suit's exoskeleton in conjunction with the micro-jet thrusters on their legs and feet, they boosted their way up to the next floor.

Once there, they quickly scanned the corridors for threats as Sar and Tak jumped up to the next floor. They repeated this process until the whole team was finally on the roof: the site of their extraction point.

* * *

><p>On the 506***th**** JFW's side of the encounter againâ€|**

As the dust cleared, Rosalie and Geena peeked around the corner into a now-vacated intersection and its new modifications. They then motioned for their girls to follow. Within moments, every one of the witches present were now gathered around the just-recently-added skylight in the ceiling.

Adriana whistled in awe at the size of the holes. "Now _that _was an explosion."

Rosalie then saw the intruders jumping up through the holes above. Two of them—the dinosaur and one other—were jumping through without much apparent effort like oversized cats. The other two appeared to have little goutts of flame eject from their feet and lower legs that carried them through the holes.

"Stairs, now!" Rosalie ordered.

"Wait!" Marian shouted. She then quickly righted the chair that'd been lying on the floor almost directly under the hole before calling out her familiar. The curved triangular ears and flowing tail of a grey Liberion Quarter Horse popped out from her head and the base of her spine before she stepped up onto the chair and launched herself up to the next floor, her familiar augmenting her physical abilities. She then popped out over the edge to shout, "Someone toss me that chair!"

Adriana took that job. She took hold of the chair and threw it up to Marian, who caught it neatly and placed it back upright on her floor. "I'll hold the roof entrance open until you get there! Just don't take too long or I'll be seriously pissed!" Marian called out before jumping to the next floor and disappearing.

"You heard her," Rosalie said. By now, her audience had grown to include several mundane soldiers who had been staring up at the building's new skylight in addition to her witches. At the sound of her commanding tone, everyone snapped their attention back to Rosalie. "We have them trapped now, so everyone to the roof. Be careful though. We still don't know what kind of weapons they may still have and why they're here. Do not expect anything so that you may deal with anything the intruders throw at you. That's all. Move out!"

As witches and mundane soldiers alike headed for the site of the final confrontation, Rosalie turned to her fellow commander and lover. "Geena."

"Yeah, I got it." Geena activated her own radio set. "Carla. Are you still there?"

"**Yeah, I am! What the hell was that blast?!**"

"A bomb, or something like it. The intruders have blown a hole through to the roof, in case you haven't noticed."

"**So what do you want me to do about those guys?**"

"Well—"

* * *

><p>On the UNSC side of the encounter—

Jakob's boots slammed onto the stone floor of the roof as he quickly swept the area. The roof was a flat expanse forming clear lines of fire as far as the eye can see. Battlements lined the edge of the roof, obviously left over from medieval times and forming convenient cover in case they wanted to engage anyone on the ground. At two of the corners were small shed-like structures made of stone. At a

guess, Jakob assumed they led back down. He put covering those up on his list of priorities.

His TACPAD then lit up. **"Jakob-san, I have a message from the Pelican incoming," Kohime-1585 reported. "Patching you through now."**

The helmeted face of a UNSCMC airman wearing the distinctive dome-headed helmet appeared on the screen. **"This is Pelican Flight Bravo Zero-Zero-One, callsign: Big Bird. We've successfully entered the atmosphere. ETA to pick-up: 7 minutes, over."**

"Roger, Big Bird," Jakob responded. "We're kind of in a pinch here. Could you pick up the pace already, over?"

"Roger that. We'll get there ASAP. Just hold on, Vanguard One. Out." The image of the helmeted pilot winked off the screen.

Jakob shut off his comm. "Alright, everyone. We'll need to buy time until that Pelican gets here. We need to—"

Suddenly, the characteristic droning of a piston engine aircraft interrupted Jakob's briefing. Every member of Fireteam Vanguard looked up at the source of the unexpected noise—and their jaws promptly dropped in shock.

Hovering about 60-70 meters above their position was a girl with white-blond hair and wearing the olive green uniform of the old US Army Air Force alongside a white scarf wrapped around her neck. How she was hovering was explained by a pair of blue machines strapped onto her legs. The things resembled WWII-era fighters but with propellers that glowed faintly with an ethereal light. What was even stranger than the machines though were the pointy brown ears sticking out of her head and the long, fluffy tail extending from her rear end.

"What. The. Hell," Jakob managed to get out after a few moments to get over the shock.

The girl then levelled a massive machine gun at them. Jakob recognized it as one of the early water-cooled variants of the venerable M2 Browning heavy machine gun due to the distinctive water cooling jacket around the barrel. Normally, he would've been utterly fascinated with the weapon, considering very few of the water-cooled variant were ever manufactured due to the air-cooled variants being much more effective, thus making the water-cooled variant extremely valuable museum pieces. However, Jakob's mind was still trying to process the fact that said heavy machine gun was being pointed at him and his team by a teenage girl—who should not have had the strength to even lift it let alone handle the recoil—in leg-mounted flying machines—which should not have even existed in the first place—and thus did not have the spare memory to allocate to geeking out.

"All of you! Drop your weapons and surrender!" the girl yelled over the sound of her own engine noise. "You have nowhere left to run—"

It was at that moment that Sar broke out of her shock. She quickly levelled her BR105 at the girl and fired.

Instead of hitting the girl though, the 10.5x70mm TTRs exploded into red mist as they hit a glowing blue shield covered with strange symbols that suddenly appeared in front of the girl.

That broke the rest of Vanguard out of their trance. "Scatter!" Jakob ordered.

Everyone dove to one side as the girl above them fired. 12.7x99mm BMG rounds tore into the stone around them, blasting thumb-sized holes on the floor. It didn't look like she was trying to hit them judging from the pattern of the bullet holes she was leaving on the floor, but it was cold comfort at the moment.

'_How the fuck is she able to fire that thing with such precision?!'_ Jakob thought frantically.

"Cover the doors!" he ordered out loud. "Keep them from getting through until our ride gets here!"

"What about that?!" Taiga indicated the M2-wielding girl still flying above them.

"Suppressing fire!" Jakob answered back.

Taiga nodded and raised up her M739B SAW, firing in short, ripping bursts at the girl to conserve ammunition. The fire caused the girl to raise that weird, blue shield and fortunately also caused her to cease firing.

Jakob had no time to pay attention to that though, as he raced towards the closest of the stairways to bottle up whoever might be coming up it. Just before he could reach it though, someone stepped out from the small shed.

'_Fuck,' _Jakob swore to himself as he recognized the USMC uniform-wearing blonde girl from the hallway.

She raised up her weapon. Instead of the Colt M1911 she was using earlier, Jakob saw that she was now wielding a M3 Grease Gun. "Stop! Lay down your arms and surrender!" she shouted.

At that moment, Jakob decided. There was no point in stopping and he was already moving forward at a considerable velocity. So he did the opposite of what the girl was shouting: speed up.

The blond girl's eyes widened in shock at Jakob's apparently reckless actions before she opened fire.

Jakob felt several rounds bounce off his energy shields. A tiny corner of his mind noticed that like with the .45 ACP round fired from that M1911 earlier, the rounds from the M3 Grease Gun were also depleting his energy shields much more than a .45 ACP round had any business to. It was only a tiny corner however, as most of his mind was focused on the enemy in front of him.

At the same time, the blond girl's Grease Gun suddenly ceased fire. The girl looked in shock and horror as she saw an empty cartridge jammed in the ejection port, with an enemy already rushing towards her.

Just before Jakob reached the girl, he turned sideways and bashed his shoulder into her. Granted he held back by a not so inconsiderable amount to avoid snapping the girl's ribcage like dry twigs, but the impact should've been enough to knock her out, if not fracture her ribs.

Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Just before the blow landed, triangular ears and that long, flowing tail (Jakob just now realized that it was a horse's tail) the girl had earlier popped out and she raised up her weird energy shield so that Jakob smashed into that instead. Gold UNSC-made energy shields collided with that circular, blue shield; and he bounced off it like a bouncy ball off a wall. Alarms blared in his helmet and the shield bar on his HUD flashed red as the shields were wholly depleted by the impact.

Jakob landed on his back and skidded back a little on the stone floor. As he raised up his MA5F to firing position and he was in the middle of pulling the trigger though, trouble happened in the form of the blond girl leaping at him.

The two rolled around on the floor as the girl tried to wrestle his still-firing MA5F from him while he tried to hold on to it. "Let go and surrender, you moron!" the girl grunted as one hand jerked the MA5F, throwing Jakob's aim off.

Jakob couldn't believe this girl's strength. No unpowered infantry should be able to match a soldier in powered armor, yet this girl was somehow pinning him down! Not only that, she was pulling his arm in such a way that he couldn't remove his finger from the trigger. In seconds, the MA5F clacked on empty. As soon as that happened, the girl reared an arm back and punched him in the helmet.

Jakob felt that impact. Very much so. It was as though she had an invisible suit of GRAM armor on that was somehow enhancing the strength of her punches. As she reared her arm back for another punch though, his left arm shot out and caught the girl's punching arm.

The two of them struggled and rolled around as they tried to throw each other off, before the girl suddenly found the correct position and managed to pin him in place. He suddenly found himself staring into a pair of fierce brown eyes the color of dark chocolate as he and the girl faced off in a stalemate, neither one able to hit one another.

"In seconds, my teammates and comrades are going to be arriving here," the girl said. Jakob suddenly realized this girl's voice. She was the one who'd spoken with the flat American accent. "There's nowhere to run. Surrender and we'll promise to treat you and your men fairly."

That tone of voice was one Jakob recognized. It was the tone his dad used to talk down terrorists who'd taken hostages to try and convince them to surrender before someone got hurt. His dad had said it was similar to the tone trainers used to talk down panicked animals. Jakob wasn't sure if he found that tone reassuring or insulting.

Then suddenly, his TACPAD flashed on. **"Release him now!"
**Kohime-1585 shouted from the flat computer on his left arm.

The girl's gaze and attention snapped to the TACPAD in reflex. Jakob saw his chance then. He reared his head back and just as the girl was turning back to him, he jerked his head forward, smashing his helmet into the girl's face. Hard.

The girl's eyes became unfocused as Jakob's headbutt knocked her for a loop. Feeling her right arm go limp, Jakob quickly released it and grabbed onto the closest part he could reach: the girl's right ear. Specifically, her right animal ear. He then jerked it sideways. Hard.

The girl's shriek of pain was abruptly cut off as he smashed her face into the stone floor.

"Marian!" Jakob heard the other blonde girl flying above cry out. He filed away that piece of information for future reference.

Flipping over so the girl was pinned beneath him, he quickly reattached his MA5F back onto his back-mounted magnetic grip next to his M70 ASAR. He then reached down and pulled out his M6M pistol from its hip holster. As the blonde girl

'_Marion or Marian,'_ Jakob thought.

started to push herself up, he jammed his M6M's muzzle into the back of her head. "Don't move a muscle," he warned the girl. "This pistol is loaded with live ammo. Not those little paint bullets we used, but explosive bullets. Don't make me use them."

Jakob felt Marion/Marian stiffen, then relax as she realized that she'd lost. "Why the fuck are you doing this?" she snarled angrily. "What's the point to all this, this?" It seemed that she couldn't even find the right word to describe this series of events.

"The point? Technically, we've already achieved our point. Now we just want to get out of here as quick and as painless as possible," Jakob answered as he let go of her animal ear and quickly wrapped his left arm around Marion/Marian's neck.

"Like I said," Marian grunted as Jakob hauled her upright. He reached over with his left hand, drew the girl's Colt M1911 out of its belt holster on her right, and threw it away. His left arm then wrapped tightly around the girl's body, pinning her arms to her side, all while his right hand was still holding his M6M to her head. "You have nowhere to run. You're just stuck up here. The only way out is to surrender, and you're so fucking not making a good case here!"

"I'm guessing you've never heard of taking the third option, huh? And for what it's worth, I'm really sorry about having to take you hostage."

"Let her go, you bastard!" the blond girl still flying around in those weird machines shouted angrily, her .50 caliber machine gun aimed at Jakob. "Or I'll-

"Or you'll shoot?!" Jakob finished for the girl above, having to shout above the sound of her leg-mounted flying machines' engines.

"You do realize that you have as much chance of hitting Marion as it with an 'a' or an 'o'?"

"What difference does it make?" Marion/Marian hissed.

"Just wanted to get your name right. It doesn't really matter either way, but it's just a little pet peeve I have."

"It's with an 'a'," Marian answered finally.

"Alright, then. If you shoot!" he shouted to the girl above. "You have just as much chance of hitting Marian with an 'a' as you have of hitting me! You get it?!"

The girl grimaced and her grip on her machine gun tightened.

"Alright, now we have an understanding! Sort of."

Then Jakob heard the stomps of booted footsteps coming from the stairways. Before he could even give the order, Sar leapt in front of him and activated her point-defense gauntlet, forming a one-woman shield wall between him and whoever's coming. Behind him, Jakob saw on his rearview cameras Tak also activating his point-defense gauntlet while Taiga kept her SAW trained on the flying girl above.

It was a near-perfect square formation. The only reason it wasn't perfect was because the flying girl was going to outflank them no matter what, being in the air and all, but it was the best Fireteam Vanguard could do under the circumstances.

And right now, they needed every advantage they could get.

* * *

<p>Coming out the stairway

Rosalie dashed out with Geena at her side, shields up and weapons at the ready. Kunika and the mundane soldiers under her command were right behind her as they spread out in a rough firing line onto the roof. Adriana and Isaac led more mundane soldiers as they erupted from the other entrance and spread out as well.

Rosalie's eyes widened in shock as she saw the armored figures arranged in a defensive formation. It wasn't the formation or the figures that shocked her though. It was the sight of Marian in the grip of one of the armored figures with an oversized pistol aimed at her head that was the clincher.

"Shit, Marian!" Geena called out to her subordinate.

"Sorry, Lieutenant Colonel Preddy," Marian said apologetically. "I underestimated them."

"Mr. Branley!" Rosalie called to the group of intruders in a cold, cold voice. "Please release Ms. Marian! There is nothing to gain from taking her hostage and everything to lose if you harm her. So please let. Her. Go."

"Sorry, de Grunne!" the one holding Marian hostage shouted back. Obviously, that one was Mr. Branley. "If I do that, there's nothing stopping you from storming our position. And believe me, it's going to get really ugly if you try that."

Rosalie heard the soldiers behind her mutter angrily at this.

At her right, Rosalie saw Geena take careful aim at Mr. Branley with her M1 Garand. The feathered ears and tail of her Northern Goshawk familiar was out as she activated her Hawkeye ability. Rosalie could see her lover's normally mild brown irises turning a fierce orange as she synched with her familiar Gale, magnifying her visual acuity and reaction time for the anticipated shot.

On the other side of the roof, Adriana's mouth was set in a grim line as she aimed her Beretta _Modello_ 38 submachine gun at the intruders. On the surface, she looked relatively calm, but one look at her madly twitching caracal tail betrayed how agitated she was. Rosalie actually hoped she wouldn't fire recklessly, as her Blast Enhance ability could easily turn the area into a bloodbath.

At Adriana's left, Isaac was taking careful aim at Mr. Branley as well. She'd put away her M1897 shotgun and was now holding her Webley Mk. VI revolver instead, trading close-range power for accuracy. The floppy ears and thick, fluffy tail of her Bouvier des Flandres familiar were already out.

Rosalie hated having to order either Geena or Isaac to take the shot and to end Mr. Branley's life. But if she had to do it to save Marian's life, then she would.

Then Rosalie noticed movement out of the corner of her eye, and she saw Kunika walk forward towards the intruders.

"Ms. Kunika." Rosalie tried to reach out to stop her, but Kunika was already walking out of her range.

The Fusoan witch walked forward until she was standing less than a meter away from the one with the shield who was aiming her rifle in a one-handed grip at her.

"Branley-_han_," Kunika asked shakily. "Please let Marian-_chan_ go. I know you don't really want to hurt her, so please. Let her go," she pleaded.

Several moments silence passed. Rosalie wasn't sure if the intruders were ignoring Kunika or just baffled by her. She knew she would've been if the situation had been reversed.

Finally, one of them answered, "You stupid."

Kunika looked in surprise at the one who'd said that: the armored figure who'd been generating that blueish, circular shield, for she'd spoken in a high-pitched soprano: a woman's voice. It had a slight rasp to it, but was clearly a woman's voice. "_Hai_?" Kunika asked confusedly.

"You stupid," the woman repeated. "Brave, but stupid. Like Taiga."

"Hey!" came Taiga's reply. Apparently, that was Ms. Daidoji's first name.

"That usually sign of good people," Sar continued, ignoring her teammate's cry.

"_Ano_â€|Thank you?" Kunika said in reply. "Does that mean you'll let Marian-_chan_ go?" she asked hopefully.

Mr. Branley sighed. "Sorry, kid. I really wish I could, but-"

Then Kunika stiffened noticeably. "Branley-_han_, are the things surrounding us your people?"

A moment passed. "Uhâ€|yes?" Mr. Branley answered.

Rosalie immediately looked around, as did everyone else. However, there was no one there.

"Ms. Kunika, where are they?" Rosalie asked.

Kunika closed her eyes and concentrated. "They-" She suddenly opened her eyes in surprise. "They're giant _kabutomushi_ [3] with guns?"

Everyone went silent at her words. Anyone could tell they were all thinking the same thing:

What?

Rosalie was about to ask Kunika to clarify when gunfire erupted in the distance. Everyone, including the intruders, stopped what they were doing and looked in the direction of the disturbance.

At the front lines, where the dug-in AT guns and tanks were defending against Neuroi incursions alongside machine guns positions, manned trenches, and bunkers, flashes of fire erupted.

Rosalie immediately turned her era radio set on. "What's happening, Sergeant Cormack?"

"**Hold onâ€|shit! It's a Neuroi attack! I repeat, it's-"**

Rosalie watched in horror as dark shapes in the distance returned the fire with crimson beams, inundating each defensive position with barrages of the deadly beams. Bright flashes erupted as ammunition cooked off and fuel ignited as each beam found their mark.

"Get everyone involved with containing the intruders to the front lines!" Rosalie shouted into the throat mike. "Make defending the base the priority!"

"**Ma'am, what about the intruders?" **

Rosalie took a brief look at the intruders. They appeared to be greatly disturbed by the Neuroi attack and were staring openly at the distant exchange of fire.

"Ignore them for now. They're not the primary threat right now. Just leave a small force to keep them bottled up here and-"

"Incoming from above!" Kunika shouted in alarm.

Rsoalie's gaze snapped up to see four dark shapes soaring up from the distance. The small dots rapidly grew larger and larger as they got closer.

"Take cover-"

The shapes landed on the roof with ground-shaking impacts, knocking quite a few people off their feet.

Rosalie stared in shock at the tank-sized, 6-legged creatures in front of her. The insectoid things had black carapaces and had a single red port on their noses. Even as she watched, four smaller things detached from the larger forms.

She noticed out of the corner of her eyes the intruders were staring at the Neuroi as well, almost as if they'd never seen such things before.

No one spoke as the Neuroi in front of them stood silently there. It seemed for a moment that all sides were surprised to see the other.

"Finagle and Murphy, it's official," Mr. Branley said, breaking the silence. "I hate you."

Then the Neuroi trumpeted their screeching battlecry and all hell broke loose.

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: Impact gel: an artificial substance developed by the UNSC for resisting kinetic impacts, the exact composition of which is still a closely-guarded secret. It is an excellent example of a non-Newtonian fluid. In its natural state, it is a pale green gel-like substance with a consistency similar to oobleck. However, when a sharp impact is delivered to it, impact gel instantly hardens into a solid with the hardness in direct proportion to the amount of kinetic energy delivered to it. This property makes impact gel very useful in the application of body armor, but is also useful in the civilian sector as well, particularly in sports equipment.

[2]: Stingspray: a medical device used to rapidly, and mostly painlessly, deliver drugs into a body. Developed in the late-23rd century, the device consists of a pistol-like device with six "chambers" in the grip that can be loaded with various drugs via a detachable cover on the bottom, a small touchscreen for adjusting the dosage, a trigger, a "muzzle" consisting of a self-sterilizing pad covered with thousands of microscopic needles contained within small chambers, and a small 3D printer just behind the muzzle for manufacturing more needles as they're used up. The design of the needles were inspired by the nematocysts of Cnidarians. When the muzzle is pressed against the skin of a patient and the trigger is pulled, the needles fire into the patient's skin at an acceleration rate of over five million g and quickly delivers their drug payload in about 700 nanoseconds before detaching themselves from the pad.

The needles are made up of a biodegradable material and are quickly consumed by the patient's immune system. The name Stingspray comes from the stinging sensation made by the needles as they penetrate the skin. Patients who'd been stung by jellyfish have noted that the Stingspray produces a similar sensation, but on a much reduced level.

[3]: Kabutomushi: the Fusoan name for the Fusoan Rhinoceros Beetle. The species spends most of its life underground as larvae and only emerges as adults to breed for 4 months before dying. Adult males measure 40-80 mm in length while females reach 40-60 mm. The males have a characteristic Y-shaped horn that they use for fighting other males to maintain their territories. The adults are often collected by Fusoan children as pets.

9. Chapter 7

****Disclaimer: I will now append this to every chapter, just in case. I do not own either Strike Witches or Halo. Strike Witches is owned by Shimada Fumikane and Halo is owned by Microsoft Studios.****

****A/N: Hey, everyone, I'm back! First off, I'm really sorry about the long delay between this chapter and the last. A combination of writer's block and procrastination has really messed with me.****

****To that end, I've decided to just limit myself to at least 5,000 words per chapter rather than the 10,000 word ones I usually do. I apologize if this makes some people upset, but right now, I just want to release chapters faster than what I usually do.****

****Also, I've changed the story's genre and rating to match the direction I want to take it in. I hope you don't mind.****

****Once again, please leave a review. Positive or negative, I just want to know what you think of my story and why.****

****So without further ado, let's begin.****

* * *

><p>Chapter 7 " Are You Nuts? There's No Such Thing as Magic!

****UNSC Command Post (callsign: Basecamp), somewhere in the Ardennes Forest****

****Date: Unknown****

****A couple of minutes before Jakob's accidental first contactâ€|

Lieutenant Colonel Avery Johnson stared at the video feeds floating above the portable holotank at the center of the "room", along with the rest of his fellow officers and some of the base's guards as well. The feeds were coming from the scouts that he'd sent to recon Germany. So far, it didn't look good.

They'd bypassed Allied patrols and reached the French side of the Rhine only to discover not all was well. On the opposite side of the

bank, spread out at 300 meter intervals, were massive tower-like structures. Each one was well over a hundred meters tall and was colored mostly black with clusters of red hexagons ringing around the tower in an alternating pattern. The most defining trait of these towers though were huge dodecahedrons floating just above each tower's peak. The dodecahedrons seemed to revolve almost at random and each of their twelve faces were colored black with a cluster of red hexagons at the center.

'_What are hell are those?_' Johnson had thought when he first saw them in the video feed. '_They look what would happen to Sauron's Tower if the Dark Lord was a geometry geek.'_'

Whether these red hexagons were sensor or weapon emplacements were unknown, but it was clear that whatever these things were, they had the Rhine covered like butter on toast. The smaller insectoid shapes running on the ground and the strange, bell-like aircraft running what looked like combat air patrols didn't help matters at all.

"How long does this go for?" Johnson asked the commander on the scene.

The commander in question: _Kapitan_ Arkady T. Vasilevsky of the Republic of Koslov Marine Corps according to the name, rank, and nationality above his video feed; cleared his throat before answering in a noticeable Russian accent, ****"As far as we can tell, it goes the length of the Rhine. All the way."****

"Damn, that river's sealed up tighter than the asshole of a constipated man in the Saharaâ€|after a week without water. Vasilevsky, where are we on finding a way past those defenses?"

****"Actually sir, we think we've found something. After thorough examination of the patrol patterns, we've discovered a number ofâ€|let's call them holes, in the patterns of each patrol."****

Johnson raised an eyebrow. "If that's the case, I'll assume there's a reason why we haven't jumped at the chance to bypass the patrols yet?"

****"There's something about those holes. They seemâ€|obvious. Too obvious. Looks like ****_**maskirovka **_**[1]** to me. I'm betting that the holes in their patrols serve as bait to lure in forces trying to recon their way into them."****

Johnson rubbed his chin as he watched the holes in the patrols come and go, opening for a tantalizingly long time before vanishing again. He could almost imagine more of those things lying in wait, like a primed mousetrap waiting to spring on any unsuspecting commando trying to recon into Germany's interior.

Then a grin came to his face as he realized that these things had planned those traps for WWII-era human commandoes. He had a lot more than people at his disposal.

"Vasilevsky, I'm sending some Mules equipped with cloaking fields to you. Use them to bypass the holes in the enemy patrols. They'll move a lot faster than any human soldier, suited or not. I'm also

launching some Ghost Owls to check things out from the air. Even if those things detect the Mules, they'll create enough distraction for the Ghost Owls to sneak by. You copy?"

Johnson heard laughter from Vasilevsky's video feed. ****_**Da**_**, I copy. Let's see how these things like a taste of our own
maskirovka****.***

Johnson grinned and nodded before turning to his troops. His sharp gaze searched through the crowd until he found the names of two of the drone operators. "Vishwamitra, O'Leary, get your asses over to the drones. I want two Mules in stealth gear and a pair of Ghost Owls ready for launch to Vasilevsky's position."

"Yes, sir," they both said.

As the two Marines went over to prepare the drones, he suddenly felt like someone was watching him, like the time he was almost shot by a Kossie sniper back in '492. He turned to look at where the feeling was coming from, but all he saw was the two girls still lying on the stretchers. They still looked as though they were merely sleeping, with their faces relaxed and-

'_Wait. What happened to their skin?_' Johnson realized. The corpse-like pallor of a Hyberzine-induced coma was now noticeably missing from the two girls, replaced by their normal skin color.

Johnson's grin returned. To him, this just got interesting. "Hey, Doc?" he subvocalized using the implants in his jaw.

"Yes, sir?" Corpsman Kurotsuki subvocalized back as she continued to calibrate her medical scanner.

"I think our little guests are awake."

Kurotsuki twitched in surprise before schooling her expression. "Impossible. The Hyberzine should be effective for another hour at least."

"Check their skin. Does that look like someone still under Hyberzine to you?"

Kurotsuki glanced up briefly from her scanner at the girls before quickly returning her attention to the flat device. "You're right. Blood flow has returned to normal, and I suspect their heartbeats have as well. I don't know how they have a resistance to Hyberzine, but it's clear that they do. So now what?"

Johnson thought for a moment then turned to one of his Marines. "Dubois," he subvocalized, making the Marine look up. "Have your team take up positions around the two sleeping beauties over there. Weapons hold. Do it quietly though. Looks like the Hyberzine wasn't as effective as we thought it'd be."

"Yes, sir," Dubois replied, with only a slight hesitation at the beginning to show him what she thought of being ordered to potentially shoot children. With a gesture of her BR105 and some subvocalized commands, she got her fireteam to stand around the two girls lying in the stretchers without making too much noise.

"Now let's end this little charade so we can get some answers, hmm? Badess, you want to be the good cop or bad cop this time?" Johnson subvocalized.

The Sangheili General clicked his mandibles together as he thought before subvocalizing back, "I will let you be the 'good cop' this time, Avery. I believe my presence will be better served as the threatening, silent one in the background."

Johnson barked out a laugh. "Hah! Me? Play good cop?" He then rubbed his chin as he thought about it. "I guess I am compared to you. Physically speaking, of course. Alright, let's go with it. This should be fun."

'Jarhad then slightly parted his fangs in that grin. "Indeed, this should be most interesting. For us, and for them."

* * *

><p>Captain Jennifer J. DeBlanc

Immediately after regaining consciousness, Jennifer realized that she was not where she last remembered. The last she remembered, she was clearly at the edge of the Ardennes Forest before that whatever it was thumped into her side and everything went black.

Even with her eyes closed, she could tell this was certainly not there.

One of the reasons she knew this was because of her father. Being a policeman, he knew what could happen to a girl out alone in the world and so resolved to teach his daughter what to do in case of certain incidents: like what to do in case of abduction.

First: if she ever woke up in a strange environment, try not to let her captors know she was awake. It could let her find out important information she could use later on while biding for time. She'd already accomplished that, keeping herself still and continuing to breathe normally as though she were asleep.

Second: inconspicuously test to see if she was restrained. She gently tried to move her hands. She quickly found their movement blocked by something. The same thing happened when she tried to move her legs.

'_Shit. They feel pretty thick and solid too. I don't think I can break them. Maybe if I had Superhuman Strength I could. And if wishes were fishes, I could make _tapas_ for the whole country.'_

Third: acquire as much information as you can, again without alerting her captors.

Through her closed eyes, she could tell that wherever she was was fairly dark, with a single source of illumination somewhere above her. She could hear muttered voices coming from that direction as well. Some sounded like men, others sounded like women, others sounded so deep and guttural she had no idea who or what could be speaking like that and why. She could also hear the sounds of machinery, or something like it, but she couldn't identify what kind

of machinery it was from. She couldn't feel any breeze on her skin, so she must've been indoors somewhere. The air smelt of sweat and metal, something Jennifer was familiar with, but there were also a myriad other odors she couldn't identify.

"Good job," a deep bass voice spoke out of nowhere.

Jennifer had to control herself to avoid jerking in shock.

"Ascertain the situation, avoid alerting your captors, acquire information; someone taught you well, kid," the voice continued. "It's too bad I already know you're awake, so let's cut the crap and get to business."

Jennifer sighed in defeat and opened her eyes. She found herself staring up at what appeared to be a metal ceiling several yards above her instead of the starlit sky she expected to see. It confirmed her earlier assumption that she was in a building on some kind. A quick look around revealed the walls and floor being made of metal too. It looked like a bunker of some kind to her. She wondered for a brief moment why she didn't spy it from the air before, then she sat upright to get a look at this mysterious kidnapper of hers.

To her surprise, there were two of them.

Sitting in front of her in a cross-legged position, Jennifer found herself staring at the biggest Negro man she'd ever seen. Even in his seated position, she could tell he was well over 6 feet tall. His upper lip was covered in a bushy gray moustache that still had vestiges of its original black. He wore some kind of armor composed of mottled green metal plates that fitted to his form. Some kind of black material seen through the gaps that looked like the witch combat bracers she'd seen Kunika use. Tucked into a holster on his hip was a massive pistol of a make Jennifer couldn't identify. A half-burned down cigar jutted out from a corner of his mouth, filling the air in front of her with a fragrant smoke, and one of his hands clutched a helmet.

The Negro man though, was the normal-looking one of the pair. Sitting to the Negro's right was the strangest creature Jennifer had ever seen. Even though it was seated, it still towered over the Negro man by a good foot or so, meaning it had to be over 8 feet tall when standing. It had a face that would've looked vaguely reptilian with its grey, leathery skin had it not been for its lower jaw, which was split into four parts. The fact that it was wearing a mottled green suit of armor and was carrying bizarre stuff that defied casual description meant it must be intelligent, but otherwise it looked completely alien to Jennifer, like the creatures in Wing Commander Freddy's science fiction novels. It stared silently at Jennifer through slit pupils set within red-orange eyes, making her very uncomfortable.

Jennifer then looked around at her settings. Behind the Negro man, in the center of the room, there was an odd-looking table that seemed to be made of softly glowing blueish glass rimmed by black metal and standing on four equally as black metal legs. On the table was Jennifer could only describe them as pictures softly glowing blue like the tabletop. Various images floated above the table, each one playing what looked like a movie like the theaters she went to in

Liberion. Unlike those movies though, these were in a quality that was indistinguishable from real life. It took Jennifer a few moments more to recognize the image directly on top of the table as a three-dimensional map of the whole northern Gallia area, complete with little forests, hills, and cities. Blue markers moved slowly across the map, watched closely by the audience surrounding them.

Standing around the table were more people clad in the same mottled green armor the Negro man wore. All of them had helmets with red-gold visors on, making it impossible to tell them apart. Some of them were staring in her direction, while others seemed to be busy typing on or speaking to the floating pictures, while yet others were working on machines that defied casual description. Standing amongst them were more of the split-jawed creatures, towering over them like giants among mere humans. The only difference between these creatures and the one sitting before her was that these had helmets on, obscuring their faces like the helmeted soldiers.

Hearing a soft groan to her left, she turned and saw Heinrike lying on a stretcher similar to her own. The blond Karlslander slowly sat up and blinked blearily. "Whereâ€¦" she asked in a dazed tone.

"Major Wittgenstein, are you okay?" Jennifer asked.

Though she was currently focused on Heinrike, she didn't fail to notice the armored soldier in the corner raise his rifle up in alarm. The soldier next to him though reached out and pushed the rifle back down. It looked like the second soldier was berating the first for his rashness, though neither of them were saying anything.

Heinrike didn't notice this though and instead turned to look at Jennifer. Her gaze still looked dazed though, as if she were having trouble shaking off the sleepiness. "Captain DeBlanc? Howâ€¦" Her gaze sharpened instantly upon seeing the thick handcuffs around Jennifer's wrists and legs. "Who did this to you?"

"Right here, kid," the Negro man spoke up.

Heinrike's gaze immediately shot to the Negro man and the split-jawed creature. She took on a look Jennifer recognized as one she used when she felt she'd been slightedâ€¦badly.

"You two," Heinrike said with all the haughtiness of a princess. "Why have you imprisoned us? Release Captain DeBlanc and I from theseâ€¦things immediately."

The split-jawed creature did not respond. It just simply stared at them, as though it were contemplating which one of them to eat.

The Negro man's response was to take a drag on his cigar and blow it away from them. "I'll gladly let you two goâ€¦after I get some questions answered, of course."

Heinrike's gaze turned even harder. "If all you wanted was for some questions to be answered, you could've just asked us normally. There was no reason toâ€¦toâ€¦abduct us and restrain us like animals."

The Negro man sighed. "Well, we didn't exactly want anyone to know we

were here, and you two were about to call in a search that would've beenâ€¦inconvenient for us. Hence the measures we took. Rest assured, we won't harm you in any way. As long as you don't try to escape or cause any trouble, of course."

"And who's this 'we' you keep talking about? Who the fuck are you people? And what is that thing?" Jennifer motioned towards the split-jawed creature.

"As to who 'we' are, that's classified. As for the big guy, he doesn't need a name. All you need to know is that he's big and scary and is going to eat you for supper if you don't answer my questions." A big grin appeared on the Negro man's face at Jennifer and Heinrike's horrified faces. "But as to who I am, that's not classified. Why don't we introduce ourselves and see where it goes from there?"

Jennifer and Heinrike gave each other a look and they nodded to one another before turning back to the Negro man.

"Very well, then," Heinrike said. "As long as we're to maintain some façade of civility, why don't you introduce yourself first, since you were so kind as to bring us here?"

The grin never left the Negro man's face as he answered, "Gladly!" He then took his cigar, which had burned down to nothing but a glowing stub, and ground it out on the ground before continuing. "The name's Avery Johnson. Pleasure to meet you. I like Sweet Williams cigars and the smell of bacon, eggs, and fresh toast in the morning. So tell me now, who the hell are you two?"

Heinrike drew herself straight up and was somehow able to assume the haughty stance of nobility despite her restraints. "I am Major Heinrike Prinzessin zu Sayn-Wittgenstein, eldest daughter of the house of Sayn-Wittgenstein of the Empire of Karlsland, commander of Nachtjagdgeschwader 2 of the Kaiserliche Luftstreitkräfte [2], and currently acting vice-commander of the 506th Joint Fighter Wing A-Unit."

The Negro man Jennifer now knew was Johnson first raised an eyebrow, then burst out in laughter. "What's with the bajillion syllable name plus titles, Princess?"

Heinrike's gaze turned as cold as an Orussian blizzard. "My name is not 'Princess'," she ground out. "You will refer to me as either Major Wittgenstein or Frau Sayn-Wittgenstein. Is that clear?"

The last bit sounded more like a demand to Jennifer than a question, which was the reason for her groan as Johnson laughed uproariously. The split-jawed creature's eyes narrowed, but it did not more than that.

"Kid, you have no idea what kind of situation you're in, do you?" Johnson asked, wiping away a tear.

"I know very well what kind of situation I'm in, Herr Johnson," Heinrike said coolly. "I just wanted to know if you knew what you were getting into when you abducted a member of the nobility of Karlsland."

"Kid, I wouldn't care if you're the Queen of Sealand," Johnson said dryly. "All I care about is getting my information in the least painless way possible, for both sides. If you want to be difficult, then you're going to be staying here for a very long time. So can the princess act and start speaking some sense, girl."

Heinrike bristled. "Are you doubting my lineage, Herr Johnson? You? You look and sound like nothing but a peasant. I doubt you can even trace you line back more than a few generations."

Jennifer groaned inwardly. She knew that Heinrike was overall a good commander, but when she started being a noblegirlâ€¦well, she was a great big pain in the ass. It was times like these she was ashamed to even be related to these blue-blooded idiots.

Johnson merely grinned. Jennifer noticed this seemed to be his default expression. "Well, I can tell you all about my aunt Marcille if you're that interested in my family, but unfortunately for you, I don't have the time or the patience for that. So how about I just ignore you until you're ready to say something intelligent and useful, blondie?"

As Heinrike gaped in shock at Johnson's casual dismissal of her, he gaze went to Jennifer and she began to prepare her standard USMC line in case of capture.

Suddenly, Johnson's eyes took on a fierce look that Jennifer recognized all too well from her time in boot camp. "You, Marine! State your name and rank!" he bellowed.

Jennifer instantly straightened and stood at attention. Or at least, she straightened as best as a person unable to stand up could. "Captain DeBlanc, Jennifer, USMC!" she snapped out before she could stop herself.

Johnson laughed. "A true, blue Marine, all the way through!" He continued laughing for a few moments more before he finally asked with a grin, "So how did a girl like you get into the Corps?"

Jennifer blinked in surprise. "What do you mean? I enlisted and went through boot camp like everyone else."

"I find it very hard to believe that the Marine Corps would let a teenage girl enlist."

Jennifer blinked in surprise. This was now the second time. She was quickly finding she did not like being surprised. "That's because I'm a witch. Can't you tell?"

Johnson sighed. "Obviously, you expect that to mean something to me. Well, it doesn't. So would you mind enlightening me as to who or what a 'witch' is?"

Jennifer was too busy gaping at Johnson to notice, but she was pretty sure Heinrike was doing the same thing. "Okay, what? How do you not know what a witch?" Jennifer asked incredulously.

Johnson gave her an impatient look. "Still waiting for my answer, kid."

"A witch is one of those fortunate girls chosen by the Aesir to wield powers beyond mortal ken," Heinrike said, catching everyone's attention. She spoke the words with the tone of someone who has repeated it in class thousands of times. "With these powers, the witch is bound by duty to serve her country and people to her utmost capability."

"That's a bit different from what I heard in class," Jennifer noted.

"Well maybe they teach it differently in Liberion," Heinrike countered.

"Okay, okay, time out," Johnson cut in. "What powers are you talking about?"

Heinrike thought for a moment before answering. "In general, a witch is superior to a mundane human in terms of constitution and strength, but each witch also has her own unique ability that may or may not be shared by others. For example, there's Superhuman Strength, which allows a witch to increase her strength to many times a mundane human's. There's Speed Boost, which allows a witch to move faster than she could normally move. Then there's-

Johnson held up a hand. "Stop. So what you're saying is: you've got magic powers."

Heinrike snorted. "I suppose if you want to put it in such a simple manner, then yes. We have magic powers."

Johnson looked contemplative as he rubbed his chin. "Is this related to the animal ears and tails you kids had on when we brought you in?"

Heinrike blinked in surprise. So did Jennifer. She was surprised that this Negro man didn't know about familiars, and she guessed Heinrike felt the same.

"Why yes. Those were Sigrun's ears and tail," Heinrike said.

Johnson just continued to rub his chin. "And who is Sigrun?"

Heinrike looked annoyed. "What do you mean, 'Who is Sigrun'? Sigrun is my familiar. Surely even you would know what a familiar is."

Johnson grinned again, but this grin looked more like a scowl than his usual toothy ones. "Princess, I'm getting very, very tired of being told that I should know something when it is very clear that I do not. Now answer my questions straight and no more of this 'But you should know this already' crap you keep pulling on me, or I'll have to sic Ol' Split-Jaw here on you."

The massive creature in question opened its mouth slightly to reveal fangs at the tips of the quadruple lower jaws. There were normalish-looking incisors on the top jaw, but the fangs grabbed most of Jennifer's attention.

Heinrike, though, narrowed her eyes at Johnson. "Fine. I will no longer assume that you know anything about witches or magic, but there was no need to threaten me to do so," she said angrily.

Johnson merely grinned yet again, but this grin looked more like his old ones. Cheerful and toothy. "Well, I could've gone by another route, but it seemed you needed something drastic to get through that thick skull of yours, Princess." He tapped a knuckle on his noggin for emphasis.

Heinrike merely scowled at him in reply.

"Now let's try this again," Johnson continued. "What is a familiar?"

Heinrike took a deep breath and breathed out "likely to vent her anger" before answering. "A familiar is an animal that has agreed to form a spiritual and mental bond with a witch. Usually, when a witch's magic awakens, an animal will appear before the witch and offer to form the familiar bond with her. If the witch accepts, the familiar will bind him or herself to the witch in a hopefully lifelong bond. The proof of the compact is in the animal ears and tail that manifest whenever a witch uses her powers."

Johnson nodded slowly. "And these animals. They speak to you?"

"Yes, they speak," Heinrike said with a tone as if she were instructing a child. "How else do you think they communicate with their witch?"

"So they speak to you in English?" Johnson asked.

"No, of course not. They speak directly into their witch's mind. How else do you expect them to communicate when they don't even speak the same language?"

"Of course. How else."

Jennifer frowned. She recognized Johnson's tone. It was the same tone her dad used when he was trying to talk to those weirdoes who babbled to thin air to calm them down. When she had asked what happened to them, he'd replied that they were going to see a nice witch doctor who would help them get better.

Jennifer was about to protest when one of the armored soldiers stepped forward.

"Excuse me, permission to ask them something, sir?" the soldier asked Johnson, in a woman's voice no less.

Jennifer didn't have time to be surprised before Johnson answered, "Permission granted."

"Thank you, sir." The female soldier then turned to Heinrike. "About the machines on your legs when we found you, what are they? We've been unable to make heads or tails of them besides the fact that they were allowing you witches to fly earlier."

Heinrike drew herself up again. "Well, _Frau_â€|?"

The female soldier looked to Johnson. He nodded in reply before the soldier looked back at Heinrike. "My name is LÃ;n FÃ•ng Dubois," she said.

'_Lon Fung Dubois? What kind of a name is that?_' Jennifer thought. She knew "Dubois" was Gallian, but she had no idea what kind of language "Lon Fung" came from.

"Well, _Frau _Lan Fong-"

Jennifer could've sworn she saw Dubois wince, but it could've been her imagination.

"-those machines are called 'strikers', or 'air strikers' to be precise," Heinrike continued without noticing her butchering of Dubois's first names. "They are the product of many years of research into combining magic and technology. I suppose you could call them the modern day witch's broomstick."

"How do they work?" Dubois asked. "There is no starting switch, or really any obvious way to turn it on. The opening is so small, there's no possible way for your legs to have fit in there, so how does it work? The engine appears to be a normal V-12 engine other than being covered with runes, but the 'striker' lacks both a fuel tank and fuel lines. How is it powered?"

"They-wait. How do you know that?" Heinrike asked suspiciously. "All of those mechanisms are hidden by the engine cowling. There is no way you should be able to examine the internal components, unlessâ€|"

Dubois coughed uncomfortably, and straightened up. Jennifer had a bad feeling about this. "We have, in the course of attempting to understand how the 'strikers' operate, disassembled them to the best of our ability while minimizing the damage to the internal components."

"You have done what?!" Heinrike screeched.

Jennifer merely groaned. _'Of course they did.'_

"You must understand, we had to understand how they functioned somehow," Dubois said. "Since you were unconscious at the time, disassembling the 'strikers' was the only option we had."

It took a couple of moments, but Heinrike somehow managed to calm herself down. "How soon can you reassemble our strikers," she said in a flat tone.

Dubois's silence wasn't very comforting.

"Let me guess, they're in a gazillion pieces?" Jennifer asked.

The nod from Dubois answered that question. "So how do your legs fit into them? And how are these strikers powered?" she asked after a moment.

Heinriek took another deep breath before answering. Apparently, this

little interrogation wasn't good for her heart. "As for our legs, the strikers' openings have a spell inscribed into them that makes the space inside larger than it appears on the outside."

There was a brief moment of silence as the soldiers absorbed the information. "So, your strikers are TARDISs," Dubois said incredulously.

"Pardon?" Heinrike asked.

"Never mind, you wouldn't get it. Just, how would that even work?" Dubois asked just as incredulously as before.

Heinrike shrugged. "Do not ask me for the details. I was neither involved in the strikers' design, nor am I privy to the inner workings of the spell. I only know that it works."

Dubois looked to Jennifer, who shrugged as well. "Don't ask me, I'm just a cop's daughter. I don't know how they write the spells or whatever," Jennifer said defensively.

It seemed like everyone present aside from the witches sighed in frustration.

"So, the power problem?" Dubois asked tiredly.

"Ah, yes," Heinrike said. "The strikers siphon magic from our bodies and burn it with air to produce power to run the crankshaft which turns the propellers at the tips of the strikers."

"There are no propellers at the tips, and there certainly weren't any when we were examining them," Dubois said.

"Ah, about that. The propellers are made of solidified ether and are normally dissipated when not in use in order to conserve space."

"Ether," Dubois said incredulously. "Just to be clear, are we talking about ether the anesthetic or something else entirely?"

Heinrike looked at Dubois in surprise. "Of course it's not that ether! I'm talking about the other ether"and yes, I'm going to explain what ether is so stop giving me that look!" she snapped out at seeing Johnson give her "the look". Johnson merely grinned at her in response. Heinrike had to take another deep breath before continuing. "Ether, or aether with an 'a', is one of the basic elements that compose the world. It is present in everything and everyone and not only does it form the basic building blocks of the world, it is also the source of all magic. Without aether, magic would not exist."

Dubois looked as though she were digesting the information, as well as everyone who wasn't Jennifer or Heinrike.

Johnson was the first one to speak. "Well, anyone got any ideas as to what Princess is talking about? Because I sure as hell don't."

"Johnson," Dubois spoke up, making everyone turn to her. She was quiet for a moment, almost as if she were a deer caught in the

headlight. Then she suddenly stood straight at attention. "Oorah, in Greek mythology, aether is the classical element that fills the space above the terrestrial sphere. By my understanding, oorah, that means what we know as space. It was supposed to be the stuff the gods breathed since, oorah, they lived in the heavens."

Jennifer had to keep herself from giggling. That "oorah" trick was the same one a noncom had taught her to improve her public speaking. Basically, the trick was to use "oorah" every time you're about to stutter. She didn't need to use it these days, but apparently this woman still wasn't good with speaking to crowds. She must have been a new recruit, or close to it.

Johnson either didn't notice, or was polite enough to not point it out. The same was for Heinrike.

"Yes, that is the classical definition of aether," Heinrike said. "But that theory has since been disproven by modern science in favor of space being a vacuum."

"Sir, Lani, you can't seriously believe that bogus story about magic, do you?" one of the nearby soldiers, a man, suddenly asked.

For a moment, Jennifer wondered who "Lani" was, then she remembered Dubois. '_So her handle is 'Lani', eh? She should use that instead of her name. Lin Fong is just too hard to sayâ€|or remember.'_'

Heinrike's gaze though, immediately snapped to the soldier. "Are you accusing me of lying, _soldat_" she said, though her tone suggested she wanted to say "You lowly cur" instead.

The soldier merely snorted. "Dude, you gotta be nuts to believe that magic exists. Why don't you try telling me mermaids and Santa Claus exists too?"

Silence stretched out for several moments in the aftermath.

"Youâ€|don't think the merfolk exist?" Jennifer asked in a tone so incredulous. it practically screamed "Are you abso-fucking-lutely insane?"

"And what in Thor's name is a Santa Klaus?" Heinrike asked just as incredulously.

The two parties just stared at each other in stunned silence.

Johnson was the first one to speak up. "Just what in God's name do you mean by tha-"

Then suddenly, an armored soldier strode over to Johnson. "Sir, we have a problem."

Johnson's gaze snapped up to the soldier. He didn't notice Jennifer's shocked look. "Who?"

"Vanguard. The whole situation has gone FUBAR. They need immediate extraction, _now_."

Johnson put his helmet on and got up. "I'm on the way. Show me what happened," he said. He walked over with the soldier to the glowing table and his voice was lost amidst the other.

Heinrike scooted closer to Jennifer and nudged her, knocking her out of her reverie. "Perhaps now should be the time to make our escape?" the Karlslandic witch whispered.

Jennifer looked around. There were still a number of soldiers with rifles standing around them. Their barrels were pointed at the ground, but their fingers were on the trigger. She had no idea what kind of rifles they were, but she somehow doubt she and Heinrike could get very far before the soldiers gunned them down. Plus, there was still that split-jawed creature sitting in front of them. Jennifer did not want to know what it was capable of if they made it angry.

"Maybe we should cooperate for now," Jennifer whispered back. "Somehow, I don't think we'd get very far if we did try to escape."

"A wise choice, youngling."

Both Jennifer and Heinrike jumped at the sound of the deep, guttural voice. They slowly turned to the source of the voice: the split-jawed creature still sitting in front of them.

"You can speak?" Heinrike asked incredulously.

The split-jawed creature parted its jaws slightly in a grin. At least, Jennifer hoped it was grinning.

"Of course. I have been studying English for quite some time. Though it might be a bit accented, I believe it is understandable, is it not?"

Heinrike blinked and shook her head to snap out of the trance she was in from watching the creature's lower jaws move as it spoke. "It is perfectly fine. I can clearly understand it despite not being a native Britannish speaker which reminds me, it is called Britannish. I don't know what this 'English' you are talking about is, but-

"I think what my commander means is," Jennifer cut in. "Wha-I mean, who the fuck are you?"

The creature "grinned" again. Jennifer wondered if it learned that from Johnson. "As for what I am, my people are called Sangheili. As for who, my name is Badess 'Jarhad, head of the 'Jarhad clan."

Jennifer could only gape at the split-jawed creature. "Did you just say your name is 'Badass Jarhead, head of the Jarhead Clan'?" she asked incredulously.

The creature who called itself 'Jarhad opened its mouth and laughed. At least, Jennifer thought it was a laugh. It sounded more like a rapidly skipping recording of a foghorn.

It was only after several seconds was 'Jarhad able to catch its breath and answer. "It is not, in fact. Though I have heard many humans make that mistake many, many times before in my lifetime. I have become rather fond of that mispronunciation, actually."

For some reason, Jennifer felt more at ease around this guy now that she'd heard it speak. Its attitude and speech reminded her of her _abuelo _[3], who'd served in the First Neuroi War and could kick any youngster's ass any day, but was otherwise the nicest guy around.

Jennifer was about to ask him more, but 'Jarhad raised a hand to stop her. She noticed that it had two fingers and two thumbs. Definitely alien.

"Now, now. There will be time for more questions at a later time. Right now, it appears our time together is nearing its end," 'Jarhad said as Johnson turned to the crowd of soldiers.

"Change of plans, people! Looks like Murphy decided to pull a fast one on one of our teams. Our cover's blown, so pack up everything and head to the designated extraction point because we're Oscar Mike!"

Instantly, there was a flurry of activity from the armored soldiers. Someone reached underneath the glowing table and the glow vanished along with the images on it. Another soldier reached over and collapsed the table into a metal-rimmed rectangle no bigger than a folded shirt. Already Jennifer's mind was boggling at this when several somethings got up in the corner and walked to the center of the room.

The things were about 6 feet tall and walked on four legs that looked like a horse's legs save for the hooves, which were cloven like a goat's. They were colored the same mottled green as the soldiers' armor and, oh yeah, they had neither heads nor tails. Both ends were blunt and empty, less like someone chopped the heads and tails off and more like they never existed in the first place. To top it all off, a machine gun sat on each of their backs, swiveling back and forth on its own despite the fact that no one was operating it. To Jennifer, the things looked like headless, tailless horse-goat robot things.

To make the whole thing even creepier, they walked like horses. _Exactly_ like horses, or more specifically, living beings and not the robots they clearly were. It gave Jennifer chills just looking at them move.

The armored soldiers seemed to take the things' appearance in stride though. They began putting equipment and stuff into saddlebags on the horse-things' sides, looking like they were just doing another day's work.

"What about us?" Heinrike asked the Negro man, snapping Jennifer out of her trance. "What are you planning to do about us, _Herr_ Johnson?"

Johnson turned to the girls. His face was now masked by the helmet and red-gold visor, but Jennifer could've sworn the guy was grinning underneath it. "Why, you're coming with us. Can't have two minors

walking around in the middle of a forest at night in their underwear. Who knows what might happen."

Both Heinrike and Jennifer blinked in confusion. "Underwear?" they asked in unison.

Johnson sighed from under his helmet. "Yes, underwear. Or are you going to tell me those panties you got on are your standard uniforms?"

"This is my uniform, Herr Johnson. I do not know how you made the assumption that these are undergarments, but-" Heinrike shook her head. "But never mind that. I thought you had agreed to release us when you had obtained your information. Are you going to honor that agreement, or are you going to show you are a scoundrel?" she said tersely.

"Oh, I don't mind being called a scoundrel. In fact, that's about the politest word I've ever been insulted in, but that's beside the point. I never said I wasn't going to let you two go along the way, now did I?"

Heinrike chewed her lip for a moment. "No, you didn't," she admitted.

Jennifer raised a hand, or rather, both of them. Raising one hand alone was a bit difficult when there were handcuffs around them. "So does that mean you'll be giving our strikers and weapons back?" she asked hopefully.

"Nope," Johnson answered cheerfully. "We'll be taking those. And your weapons too. Wouldn't want you two to accidentally start an incident now, do we?"

Jennifer and Heinrike started to protest, but before they could do so, another armored soldier walked up to Johnson, interrupting the two witches and grabbing their attention. It wasn't the soldier himself that they found so arresting, but what was sitting on his right arm like a trained falcon.

The thing might've looked like an owl at first glance. It was generally shaped like an owl. It had feathers like an owl. It even had a pair of taloned feet like an owl. But one look at its face told Jennifer that it definitely wasn't an owl. No owl she ever heard of had glassy camera lenses for eyes, and had its beak replaced by another small camera.

Worse, it was staring at her. Jennifer could swear it was tilting its head to get a better look at her.

'_This place is just one big freak show,'_ she thought worriedly.

"Sir, we have a problem," the soldier said.

This time, Johnson's grin was quite wry. "Looks like Murphy has it in for us today. What's wrong this time?"

"When I ordered the Ghost Owls to circle back to our position in preparation for retrieval, they picked up five contacts on their

passive radar receptors. All five contacts are emitting radar waves."

Johnson blew out a breath. "Night fighters. Great. It'd take a miracle for them to damage the Pelicans and Eagle, but they can rip us up if we try to make it to the DZ in the open. Tell the DURANDALS to watch the skies when we're approaching the DZ, and to shoot down any planes on an attack run. Also, somebody break out the Jackhammers and lock onto them, but don't fire. Engage only if they show hostile intent."

Jennifer watched as several soldiers opened some chests and took out what looked like double-barreled bazookas before making way one of the walls. One of the soldiers reached over to a console and pressed a button on it. There was a clunk, and then part of the wall split open to reveal a ramp, which promptly dropped down and filled the room with the smell of vegetation and soil.

'_We must still be in the Ardennes Forest somewhere,'_ Jennifer realized.

The soldiers carrying the double-barreled bazookas all ran down the ramp and disappeared from sight.

"Sir, there's one more thing, really weird too," the soldier with the robot owl said. "The contacts are small, too small to be planes. They look like they're not much bigger than a person."

Jennifer and Heinrike suddenly looked at each other in realization and horror at who those contacts were.

"No, don't shoot!" Jennifer screamed. "They're not threats!"

Johnson turned to them once more. In fact, nearly everyone nearby turned to the two witches. "Explain. Now," Johnson said.

"They're our nachthexen: night witches," Heinrike explained. "They're probably here to search for us since we did go missing during a patrol."

"You don't have to hurt them," Jennifer said. "Just let us go and explain it was all a mistake, and I'm sure we'll all get out of here in one piece, okay?"

Johnson rubbed his currently metal-covered chin. "That will all depend on what these 'night witches' do next. Funny how you two never mentioned you had energy shields and damage buffs for your guns, eh?"

Jennifer and Heinrike blinked in unison.

"Because I thought you would have known that already," Heinrike said.

"What's a damage buff?" Jennifer asked at the same time.

Johnson sighed. "Regardless, it all depends on what these 'night witches' do next. If they don't see us, that's great. If they're willing to talk instead of shooting, that's fine with me. But if they decide to go after us guns a-blazin', then I'll have to give the

order to fire." He stared back at the horrified looks he got from Jennifer and Heinrike. "I don't like the idea of shooting kids as much as you do, and if there's any blame to be placed afterwards then I'll take all of it. However, if it's a choice between complete strangers and my Marines, then I'll protect my Marines with everything I got."

Heinrike glared at Johnson, while Jennifer just stood stock-still, going over what he said in her head.

'_For Zeus's sake, everything's going to shit here!_' Jennifer thought. '_I have to get a signal out to those witches, but my magic antennae might make these guys open fire if their trigger fingers are as itchy as I think they are. Ohhh! Whoever you night witches are, I hope you're not trigger happy, or else this is going to get ugly really fast.'_

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: _Maskirovka_: a Russian term broadly meaning military deception; literally means "masking". It originally referred to simply camouflage, but was eventually broadened to include concealment, imitation with decoys and dummies, maneuvers intended to deceive, denial, and disinformation.

[2]: _Kaiserliche _Luftstreitkr fte_: Karlslandan for "Imperial Air Force", and often translated into the Imperial Karlsland Air Force for Britannish speakers. This was the modern name for the Air Force of Karlsland whose origins dated back to before the First Neuroi War, when it was originally known as _Die Fliegertruppen des karlslanden Kaiserreiches_ ("Imperial Karlslandan Flying Corps").

[3]: _Abuelo_: Hispanian for "Grandfather".

10. Chapter 8

****Disclaimer:** I will now append this to every chapter, just in case. I do not own either Strike Witches or Halo. Strike Witches is owned by Shimada Fumikane and Halo is owned by Microsoft Studios.**

****A/N:** Hey, there. Sorry about the long wait again, but this chapter ballooned out of control. I hope you enjoy it.**

* * *

><p>Chapter 8 â€" In Blackest Night

****300 meters above the Ardennes Forest****

Heidemarie Schnaufer flew at cruising speeds over the sea of green that was the Ardennes Forest. Though to be accurate, it was more of a sea of grey trees due to the low-light conditions and her own vision. Though her power allowed her to see clearly in the dark, the layer of _tapetum lucidum_ behind her retina could only see in shades of grey at night. Other colors were invisible, which resulted in everything looking like a black and white movie. Still, being able to see clearly with only moonlight or starlight for illumination had its

advantages, like allowing her to spot a crash site in the dead of night.

Which was probably why _Major_ Valerie KrÃ¼ger and _Commandant_ Marielle Courvoisier had coopted her for this mission.

"**Attention all **_**nachthexen**_**, night witches," **KrÃ¼ger ordered over the radio. "**Begin a grid search for **_**Major **_**Wittgenstein and Captain DeBlanc. They should have went down in this area, so do not stop searching until you find them. **_**Verstanden?**_**" **

"_Jawohl, Major_", Heidemarie replied with a distracted tone as she scanned the trees below. For some reason, she had been having the feeling that she was being watched. It had begun a few minutes ago, and had not stopped since.

"_**Jawohl,**_**" **_Obergefreiter_ Tresa Bloch said over the radio, before adding quietly to Schnaufer. "_Mein Kaiser._"

Schnaufer snapped out of her reverie and looked at her wingmate, who had flown next to her and was grinning. "Get it?" Bloch asked.

Schnaufer just stared blankly at her. She hadn't heard a word of what Bloch said. "Umâ€¦"

Bloch sighed. "Honestly, you're going to miss your whole life at this rate. Relax a little, will you?"

"_**Pardon**_**, Major. Could you please repeat that last part?"** their remaining wingman, _Caporal_ _Henriette Mainard, asked over the radio.

"**Which part do you need repeated, Mainard?"** KrÃ¼ger asked.

"**That last word, Major. What was itâ€¦werstanden?"**

KrÃ¼ger sighed in exasperation. "**Do you not speak a word of Karlslandan, Mainard?"**

"**I think what my comrade means to ask is if you understood the orders she gave you,"** Courvoisier cut in gently.

"**Ah. **_**Oui**_**, Major. I understand the orders perfectly, ma'am," **Mainard answered crisply.

KrÃ¼ger sighed. "**Honestly, Courvoisier. I cannot understand how such a disciplined young witch such as Mainard could end up like that under **_**your**_** tutelage."**

"**Ah, but you forget something, Val. You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar, you know?"** Courvoisier pointed out.

Heidemarie heard KrÃ¼ger snort. "**Soldiers are not flies, and I've never heard of any military use for insects either. And don't call me Val."**

Courvoisier sighed over the radio. "**Ah, you missed the point yet

again, ****_**Val**_**.*****

Then Heidemarie heard KrÃ¼ger clear her throat, as though she were embarrassed. ****"In any case, spread out and begin the search for-"*****

Suddenly, Heidemarie heard something interrupt KrÃ¼ger. It sounded like a wet tearing sound mixed with the sound of something cracking. She quickly turned to look at KrÃ¼ger, just in time to catch the spray of blood along with a small dark shape fly away from KrÃ¼ger. KrÃ¼ger's face went very pale as blood spurted out the stump where her right arm had been. She reached out with her remaining arm towards Heidemarie, as if pleading for aid.

Heidemarie gunned her Bf 110 G-4 striker's engine as she tried to grab KrÃ¼ger's outstretched hand. She almost made it before KrÃ¼ger's own Henschel Hs 129 striker ground to a halt and she fell out of the sky.

Heidemarie could only watch in horror as KrÃ¼ger smashed into the forest below, almost certainly dead.

*****Ambush! From below!***** Courvoisier shouted over the radio. ****"Form up! Link your shields!"*****

Her orders snapped Heidemarie out of her daze and she formed up with Courvoisier, Bloch, and Mainard in a tight formation. They aimed their shields at an angle towards the ground, overlapping to discourage any further attacks.

"What happened?!" Bloch shouted. Her blue eyes were wide with shock and worry. "Where's Major KrÃ¼ger?!"

"Dead," Courvoisier said grimly. "Something shot her with a high caliber round."

Bloch looked stunned. "Nein, that can't be. Sh-she's led us for this long. How can sheâ€¦!"

"It's true," Courvoisier said, her tone as bitter as quinine. "Schnauffer and I saw it."

Bloch's gaze snapped to Heidemarie, her look begging Heidemarie to deny it.

Heidemarie avoided the gaze. She wasn't comfortable with social interactions in general, much less this. She could only nod and confirm Bloch's worst fears.

"Scheisse!" Bloch shouted as tears streamed down her cheeks. She began to look madly down at the forest for a target. "I'll kill those verdammt Ratten!"

Courvoisier slowly flew backwards until she could wrap an arm around Bloch in a hug without compromising the shield wall. "Calm down, Bloch," she said.

"But-"

"I said, 'calm down'," Courvoisier repeated gently but firmly. "You

will get your revenge for Major KrÃ¼ger later, but not as you are now. Not while you are in this condition. Now take a deep breath and _calm down_."

Bloch took a deep breath, then exhaled it as Courvoisier ordered. After a few seconds of repeating this, Bloch finally said, "I am calm now. Now please let me go."

Courvoisier nodded and released her grip on Bloch. "Now then, I assume no one caught sight of where the shot came from?" Courvoisier asked. Upon seeing the collective shake of heads from her subordinates, her face hardened. "Well then, we will continue with the search for Major Wittgenstein and Captain DeBlanc. This time though, we will fly in close formation and keep our shields tilted towards the ground. Watch the forest for any sign of whatever it was that shot Va-Major KrÃ¼ger. We still have two downed witches to look for, so we will keep moving on. Understood?"

Everyone said their affirmation, and the search continued on.

But Heidemarie could still feel the eyes of whoever or whatever was watching them boring into her like the gaze of a predator.

* * *

><p>UNSC Command Post (callsign: Basecamp), somewhere in the Ardennes Forest

Johnson watched the video feed from the Ghost Owl with an uncharacteristically grim expression. Not many people would've been in a jolly mood after seeing a teenage girl's arm being blown off at the shoulder and said girl subsequently crashing into the ground at over 200 km/h. The half-shouted/muttered curses (in multiple languages, no less) from the other soldiers watching indicated they felt the same.

They were also loud enough to firmly grab the attention of the two witches. "What happened?" Heinrike asked. "What's going on?"

Jennifer didn't need to ask. She knew that when soldiers cursed like that, something had gone FUBAR. She just hoped that it wasn't as FUBAR as she feared.

"Seems like one of these 'night witches' you were talking about was just blown out of the sky," Johnson answered calmly.

She was wrong. It was even worse.

"You _schwein!_" Heinrike screamed. "You said you would not shoot them unless they fired first! You gave your wor-"

"Princess," Johnson interrupted with a _very_ annoyed tone. "Did I ever say at any point that _we_ were the ones that shot down that night witch?"

Heinrike opened her mouth to argue, then realized Johnson had a point and promptly closed it again. She still had to take another deep breath before she could respond though. She was really starting to dislike _Herr_ Johnson, if only because he was bad for her heart.

"Fine, then who shot the witch down?" Then after a pause, "Who was the witch that was shot down?" she asked with a note of worry.

"As for the first question, we still don't know. Vishwamitra, how's the backtracking going?"

"Almost," the soldier named Vishwamitra replied, watching the feed from the owl-like UAV on his briefcase-sized TACTOP [1]. "Ankha is retracing the flight path of that bullet and is circling in. Just give it a minute and we'll have our guy," he reported, using the Ghost Owl's nickname.

Johnson nodded and turned back to Heinrike. "There you have it. And to answer your second question, the Ghost Owl picked up some of their conversation too. The other witches called her 'Major Valerie KrÃ¼ger'." He frowned as he saw Heinrike's face pale. "You know her?"

"_Ja_, I mean, yes," Heinrike quickly corrected. "I was her commanding officer just last year. She must've been promoted in the meantime, butâ€¦" She then shook her head, as if clearing her mind, before looking Johnson in the eye. "_Herr_ Johnson, I must ask a request of you and your soldiers, however as detestable as it may be."

"Let me guess, you want me to send my troops to do a CSAR for this KrÃ¼ger girl," Johnson said.

"Seesar?" Heinrike asked quizzically. "I do not understand that word. Perhaps you mean Caesar, as in Julius Caesar? But I do not understand what he has to do with my request."

Jennifer groaned. "Major, I really don't think that's what he meant."

Johnson's mouth twitched in combination amusement and annoyance. "CSAR, not Caesar. Charlie-Sierra-Alfa-Romeo."

Jennifer blinked in confusion. She knew that he talking about the phonetic alphabet the US used, but that did _not_ sound right to her. "Don't you mean Charlie-Sugar-Able-Roger?"

Johnson merely stared at her in confusion. The confusion lasted for a few moments until something clicked in Johnson's head and he suddenly burst out in laughter. "Not to me, it isn't! And it won't be to anyone in here either."

Jennifer wondered what that meant and wanted to ask further, but Johnson cut her off.

"CSAR stands for 'Combat Search and Rescue'," Johnson said to Heinrike. "I'm sure you're smart enough to figure out what that means from the words, right?"

Heinrike nodded tightly. "So will you? If you will not, then at least release me so that I may search for KrÃ¼ger myself."

"By yourself?" Johnson asked curiously.

"If need be, _Herr_ Johnson. If need be," Heinrike replied,

conviction burning in her eyes.

Jennifer sighed. "You know, one of these days you're going to have to drop that whole Karlslandic Knight-type mindset you got there and try to come up with the rational plans you usually do."

Heinrike's gaze snapped to her companion. "Are you saying that I should abandon my former subordinate, without even at least an attempt to rescue her?"

Jennifer sighed once more and tsk-tsked at her commander. "Hello? US Marine here? 'No man gets left behind'? Hades, if you'd said anything else, I'd have been really disappointed. I'm just saying, stop thinking with your heart whenever your honor thing comes up and use your head instead. I mean, take just now. You could've asked for a weapon, or at least for me to accompany you. Sure, the chances of either happening are a bazillion to one, but at least you tried."

Heinrike stared at her for what seemed like forever before she slowly nodded. "I suppose you are correct, Captain DeBlanc. Perhaps I need more experience in these matters."

"Hell, I'm just surprised you two made the ranks you have now," Johnson said suddenly, startling both witches. "It's not often teens get made Captains and Majors."

Before Jennifer could protest, Johnson turned to one of his other Marines. "O'Leary, any of the Ghost Owls got a visual on where that 'night witch' crashed?"

"Affirmative," O'Leary replied without looking up from her TACTOP. "Albert is currently circling the crash site. Should I task it to monitor the location?"

"Do it."

"Roger. Retasking Albert."

Jennifer looked in disbelief at Johnson. "Wait, does that mean you're going to let us look?"

"Hell, no," Johnson replied. "I'm sending my Marines instead."

"Wait!" Heinrike yelled. "Allow Captain DeBlanc to accompany your fireteam to KrÃ¼ger's location."

Johnson sighed. "I already told you, Princess. I'm not going to--"

"If KrÃ¼ger is critically injured when your soldiers arrive," Heinrike interrupted. "Which I'm sure she is given she was shot down, then DeBlanc would be able to stabilize her until proper medical aid can be rendered."

Johnson looked at Jennifer. "Explain," he said.

Jennifer cleared her throat before speaking, just to get herself used to the sudden turn of events and to keep herself from stuttering. "My

magic ability is called 'Accelerated Healing'. I can feed my magic into a person's body and speed up their own body's healing ability. The effect lasts for a while after I apply it the more magic I apply, so it can treat some pretty serious injuries if I put enough magic into it."

"Give me an example," Johnson said. "How fast is it? How bad an injury can it heal?"

"I once applied Accelerated Healing to someone with a fractured femur, and the bone was fully mended after two days," Jennifer replied proudly.

"Really?" asked one of the soldiers next to Jennifer.

Jennifer had noticed the soldier had been hovering near them like a mother bird, and was surprised to learn that the soldier was a "she".

"Yeah, really," Jennifer replied. "If you have any injured, I could demonstrate for-"

"Later," Johnson interrupted before returning to what he was doing.

Honestly though, Jennifer wasn't quite sure what he was doing. From what little of his body language Jennifer could read under that suit of armor, it looked like Johnson was having a conversation with someone, but he wasn't even making a sound. It was like Johnson was a mime having a silent conversation with an invisible person.

'_Weird,'_ thought Jennifer.

Finally, after what seemed like forever to Jennifer, Johnson stopped "talking" to his invisible friend and turned to Jennifer. "Doc, release her restraints."

"Gladly," the female soldier said.

As the soldier produced a small chip and bent down to insert it into a slot on Jennifer's handcuffs, Jennifer noticed something on the woman's shoulder pauldron. It was a small, but familiar insignia to her: a winged scepter with a pair of snakes entwined around it. It was a caduceus: the staff carried by Hermes, and the insignia of the US Navy Hospital Corpsman.

'_Okay, so these guys are probably Liberians,' _Jennifer thought as the heavy handcuffs opened with a beep and a click. _'The real question now is where the hell did they get all of this advanced technology from? It all looks like it came straight from one of Wing Commander Preddy's issues of _Astounding Science-Fiction [2], _for Jove's sake! Add in the split-jawed, reptile-ish guy and I could _be_ in one of those comics.'_

Finally, the legcuffs went off and Jennifer could finally stand up. She stretched with a small sigh of pleasure at being able to move freely again before turning to Mr. Johnson. "So what now?" she asked him.

Johnson pointed at the open ramp-door. "Head out that door. There's going to be some people waiting for you. Just go with them, try not to make too much noise, and you'll be a-okay."

'_Okay, simple plan. Should go nice and easy. Exceptâ€|'_

"So, do you expect me to go out there without a weapon?" Jennifer asked. "I may be a captive and all, but won't I lose all value if I'm dead?"

Johnson stroked his chin as he thought for a moment before answering. "Dubois, these 'witches' had weapons on them when we brought them in, right?"

"Yes, they did," Dubois replied. "Other than those autocannons, which I'm not sure how they were even able to lift let alone wield, Ms. Wittgenstein-"

"_Major_ Wittgenstein," Heinrike corrected.

Dubois stared briefly at Heinrike before continuing. "Right, _Major_ Wittgenstein had a small-caliber pistol with her we've identified as a Beretta Model 1935, in addition to the two Panzerfausts. As for Captain DeBlanc-"

"Eh, just call me DeBlanc," Jennifer said with a shrug. "I'm not like my CO here when it comes to rank."

Dubois's stare was centered on Jennifer this time before she continued a few moments later. "Alright then, DeBlanc had in her possession a M1A1 Thompson submachine gun and a Colt M1911 pistol. In addition there were two Mk 2 fragmentation grenades, a Mark 2 combat knife, and a roll of duct tape in her pouches."

"You consider the duct tape a weapon?" Heinrike asked quizzically.

"Yep," said Jennifer, along with _every_ human soldier in the room, which made her start in surprise. "You guys, and girls, too?" she asked.

The soldier next to Dubois shrugged. "Hey, a hundred and one uses for space tape [2], right? It's gotta be the same with duct tape," he said.

Jennifer blinked in confusion. "Space tape?"

Another, much taller, soldier on the male soldier's opposite side walked over to him, and smacked him on his helmeted head. It sounded pretty hard to Jennifer from the sharp, metallic _clang_; but that could be just due to the armor.

"You idiot," the soldier said in a feminine voice. "The Lieutenant Colonel said we weren't supposed to talk about that in front of them."

Jennifer wondered what could be so important about something called "space tape". It just sounded like a fancy brand of duct tape to her.

The male soldier rubbed the spot where the female soldier had struck him. "Dude, forgot about that. But shouldn't you have just left me talking? It's not like Jen here would know what I'm talking about."

The female soldier raised a finger as if to argue, then slowly put it back down as she realized the truth of what he said.

"Ha! Got'cha there, Atlanta!" the male soldier said.

The female soldier, evidently named Atlanta for a reason Jennifer couldn't hope to comprehend, merely grumbled in response.

Johnson coughed, interrupting the two soldiers. "Now that I have your undivided attention, someone go get that M1911 over here, on the double!"

Dubois turned to the male soldier. "Rodriguez, go get that M1911," she ordered.

"Dude, why me?" he protested.

"Is that a problem, PFC Rodriguez?" Dubois asked. Her voice still sounded pleasant, but there was a core of steel to it now Jennifer hadn't heard before.

Rodriguez straightened immediately. "Yeah, Lance Corporal Dubois. One M1911 comin' right up." With that said, he started to walk away, then suddenly stopped and turned around. "By the way, what's a M1911 look like again?"

Jennifer gaped at him for a moment before palming her face. "How the hell do you not know what a M1911 looks like?" she asked.

Rodriguez shrugged. "Hey, don't ask me! I've only ever one in a museâ€|never mind."

'_Mewzee?_' Jennifer thought before she shook her head.

"The one that's bigger than Major Wittgenstein's," Jennifer said. "That's the one."

"Ah, got'cha." With that info in mind, he set off.

Jennifer's gaze followed where Rodriguez was headed, to the other side of the room where a sheet of fabric laid. On the sheet were innumerable parts that Jennifer was barely able to recognize as the remains of her F7F-3N Tigercat striker and Major Wittgenstein's Ju 88 striker. Jennifer sighed as she realized how long it would take to reassemble them, and that's assuming they didn't break any of the magitech parts, which would be a nightmare to repair without a mechanic trained in doing so.

As Jennifer groaned at the desecration of her beloved machine, Rodriguez crouched down and picked up the M1911 still in its holster.

"Here, catch!" he shouted just before he tossed the bundle at Jennifer.

She caught it handily and tied the leather holster back around her waist. As she pulled the pistol out, she noticed the other soldiers' reactions. They were alert, but not as nervous as she expected people watching a potential hostile holding a gun to be.

'_Shit. Do they think I can't hurt them with this?_' she thought. '_I mean, I guess I won't be able to shoot anyone without getting gunned down myself, but how are they so confident their armor can protect them from a round of .45 ACP_ _to the face?_'

Shaking her head in disbelief, she checked the slide to make sure a round was in the chamber, checked the safety to make sure it was on, and then pulled out the magazine. Seeing it was full, she slapped it back in and re-holstered the pistol. She checked the magazine pouch and found the two magazines in it still full of .45 ACP.

"So that's it? One fully loaded pistol with two mags?" Jennifer asked.

Johnson grinned that annoying grin. "Hey, the ODSs are supposed to be the ones doing the fighting, not you. Your job is supposed to heal this night witch girl if possible. Now get moving, Marine!"

"Yes, sir. Whatever you say," Jennifer said sarcastically as she started towards the ramp.

"Oh, and two more thing," Johnson said, making her stop. "First things first, Vishwamitra. What have we got on the sniper? The Ghost Owl get a bead on him?"

"Negative, _Ankha_â€" Vishwamitra put quite a bit of emphasis on Ankha being the Ghost Owl's name. "â€"didn't get a visual on whoever it was. Sniper must've displaced right after the shot. Whoever he is, he's pretty good."

"Right." Johnson nodded, before turning back to Jennifer. "The point is, we haven't found the sniper yet, so watch your back out there."

Jennifer nodded. "Got it. So what's the second thing?" she asked.

Johnson grinned yet another of his mischievous grins. "Don't get too freaked out by the Hunters. They're on our side, and there's going to be two of them tagging along."

Jennifer blinked in confusion as she got on her way again. '_Hunters? What in Hades do these guys need hunters for? Gunning down deer with machine guns? And why would I be 'freaked' out by them, whatever that means.'_'

* * *

><p>A few minutes laterâ€|

As Jennifer walked down the metal ramp, she saw a lone figure waiting for her at the bottom: a soldier armored like the rest and cradling a rifle, but was different somehow.

As Jennifer came closer, she could make out small but significant

differences in detail compared to the ones the others wore. Instead of a mottled green, the metal plates were a mottled grey and black color that made it hard to see in the low-light conditions. The visor, instead of being a thin rectangle, was shaped more like a wide triangle and seemed to offer the user a wider sight picture at the cost of a potentially larger weak point. On the soldier's back was a massive scoped rifle nearly as long as Jennifer was tall. There was no sling though, so she had no idea how it was just sticking there unless the soldier had glued it on. Held in his hands was an odd-looking rifle about the size of her M1A1 Thompson, pointed at the ground and with his finger resting on the trigger guard. He clearly wasn't looking for a fight.

Throughout Jennifer's examination, the soldier said nothing, did nothing, and there was absolutely zero body language. He was like a statue for all the emotion he showed, and it creeped Jennifer out just staring at him.

"So, you're one of the guys I'm supposed to be working with?" Jennifer asked.

The soldier then let the statue façade slip for a single action: he chuckled, revealing "him" to be a "her". "I wouldn't exactly call myself a 'guy' now, but yes. I'm supposed to be guarding you," the female soldier answered.

By now, Jennifer was so used to so many of the armored soldiers to be of the feminine variety that she firmly decided not to react to this one. She just held out her hand. "The name's Captain Jennifer DeBlanc, USMC. You can call me DeBlanc."

The female soldier took her left hand off her rifle and took the offered hand gently but firmly in an armored glove before shaking it. The black glove felt weird to Jennifer, like hard cloth with a slippery-ish texture save for the palm and sections of the inner finger surfaces, which felt more like roughened rubber.

"Call me Kitty," the female soldier said.

Jennifer raised an eyebrow at the name. "That can't be your name, right?"

"Callsign," Kitty explained.

Jennifer shook her head in confusion and instead, decided to look around to get her bearings. She was definitely still in the Ardennes Forest if the thick tree cover was any indication. What surprised her was what she saw when she looked behind her. Instead of the building she expected to see, she saw a moss-covered boulder with a small tree growing on top of it. The boulder was less than half the height of the surrounding trees.

'_A boulder. A _frickin'_ huge boulder, but still a _frickin'_ boulder_ _that looks like it's been there since the beginning of time. What in Hades?_'

Jennifer rubbed her eyes to make sure what she was seeing was real. The ramp she had just walked down from extended nearly the entire length of the square-ish boulder, but was clearly made of metal compared to the surrounding stone. Curious, Jennifer let go of

Asada's hand and walked over to the side of the boulder. She reached and rapped on the side of the boulder.

To her shock, not only did the "boulder" clang like it was made of metal, but the surface of the "boulder" flickered for a moment, revealing dark grey metal, before turning back to stone again. Not only that, the "tree" on top had done the same. Only, it had revealed itself to be an antenna.

Looking around, Jennifer realized too that the area was strange. The "boulder" was sitting in a shallow crater and surrounded by large wooden splinters, almost as if it had crashed down from high up and crushed any tree in its way. The surrounding vegetation was also charred and flattened, suggesting the "boulder" had produced large amounts of fire and heat upon landing, like a meteor.

"What in Hades?" Jennifer said in disbelief.

"Oh, that."

Jennifer spun around in surprise to see Kitty standing not more than an inch behind her. She hadn't heard the soldier walk up at all, even with all that armor, weapons, and equipment on her. It was as though Asada had been a ghost.

Jennifer briefly wondered if Kitty was a _shinobi_, before snapping out of it and concentrating on the problem at hand. "Okay, what the hell is with that?" she asked, jabbing a thumb at the "boulder".

"Hologram generator," Kitty replied. "Good for fooling people from afar, but doesn't stand up to close inspection. Flickers when touched, or when rained on. Heard eggheads are still working on that."

"Holo-wha-"

"Doesn't matter," Kitty interrupted. "Come on, we're wasting starlight here. Let's get a move on."

"Wait a minute, Kitty," Jennifer protested. "It's just you? I thought that Johnson guy said there'd be people, as in more than one person."

"Oh, they're around."

"â€|Well, shouldn't we wait for them? I mean-"

"By around, I mean they're around us. Right now."

Jennifer started in surprise and quickly looked around. There was nobody else there though. Just her and Kitty-

'_Wait,'_ Jennifer thought as she noticed something. She couldn't tell with 100% certainty, but she spied a shape that looked like somewhat a crouched human form, but was colored and textured exactly the same as the surrounding foliage. In fact, the only reason she spied the form was because from her current angle of vision it had been silhouetted against a distant tree. Had she not been told there was someone around her, she'd have mistaken the form as a bush or a

piece of vegetation.

Kitty noticed her stare and looked towards the crouched form. "Hey, Princess. Jig's up. She saw you."

The crouched form, apparently named Princess, turned around, revealing the visor and a scoped rifle as the only thing somewhat visible. The rifle had leaves and branches wrapped around it, making it even harder to spot than its wielder if that was possible. "Huh, and I thought I'd picked a good spot to hide too. You have a good eye," said Princess in a light, gentle voice. Her voice was completely at odds with her intimidating, armored form.

Jennifer gave an embarrassed laugh. "It was nothing. Just luck that I saw you. Hades, I missed you the first time, remember?"

Princess laughed and stepped forward. The forest camouflage melted away to reveal the same dark grey and black coloration Kitty had on her armor. "Don't feel too bad about yourself. It took a good eye to spot someone with camoskin on."

As Jennifer wondered where she could get some of this "camoskin" these soldiers were using, Princess extended her left hand to her. "Nice to meet you, despite the circumstances."

Princess's greeting sounded much friendlier than Kitty's curt one to Jennifer, which made her relax considerably more as she took the offered hand. "Nice to meet you too, Princess," Jennifer replied as she looked around. If there was anyone else around, she couldn't see them. "So are you two it, or are you going to surprise me some more?"

"Okay, everyone. Come on out," Kitty said.

Suddenly, two more forms stood up and walked over. Even though she'd just seen how effective the "camoskins" were, the effect still spooked her. Imagine a bush or a rock suddenly standing up and revealing themselves to be an armed person, and that would be the closest to what Jennifer was feeling right now.

One of the soldiers held out a hand to Jennifer. The other hand held the same Tommy gun-sized rifle she'd seen a lot of the other soldiers hold, Kitty included. "So you're DeBlanc, eh? Call me Muffin,"

Jennifer raised an eyebrow. "Muffin. You mean that thing that looks like a cupcake?"

Muffin sighed in exasperation. "It's an individual-sized quick bread that can be made either sweet or savory. Compared to a cupcake, it's an entirely different beast."

"Uh-huh." Jennifer nodded as though she understood, but didn't.

As Jennifer and Muffin ended their handshake, the other soldier held out his hand, though judging from the other three's genders so far

"Snapshot," the last soldier introduced in a feminine voice like the other three. She held in her hands a sniper rifle nearly as massive

as the one Kitty had on her back, but clearly of a different design.

"Huh, another one of these 'call signs'?" Jennifer asked.

Snapshot nodded sagely.

Jennifer's gaze wandered over to the sniper rifle Snapshot held. Aside from its size, she noticed that the rifle was connected to a large backpack-sized thingie on Snapshot's back via a thick, black wire. She wondered if the "backpack" was actually some kind of massive battery. Also, the magazine appeared to be located behind the trigger. She nodded in understanding as she realized that the arrangement reduced the size of the rifle by allowing a longer barrel in a shorter weapon.

Snapshot apparently noticed her stare and shifted her rifle. "Interested?"

Jennifer nodded again, this time in confirmation. "Yeah. I mean, this is a _huge_ rifle. What in Hades is it chambered in?"

"Twelve point seven millimeters," Snapshot reported casually.

Jennifer blinked in surprise. "Shit, you girls use our rounds too? Next, you'll be telling me your tanks are from Ostmark and your planes are made in Tawantinsuyu [3]."

Jennifer suddenly felt their gazes bore into her, as if she'd said something completely weird.

"What?" Jennifer asked nervously.

"Nothing," Kitty replied calmly. Too calmly, as though she was trying to change the subject.

Jennifer opened her mouth to ask about it, but was interrupted by something. She felt it first as a slight rhythmic shaking in the ground, as though a giant were walking through the area, and it was getting stronger, as though whatever it was was getting closer. She looked around at the female soldiers, but either they didn't notice or they weren't concerned about it. Given what she'd seen of their abilities so far, she assumed it was the latter. Still, she looked around nervously for the source of the footsteps.

It didn't take long for Jennifer to notice what was coming.

Striding up to the group were two massive things. Even from that distance, Jennifer could tell they were _waaay_ over twice her own height of nearly 5' 4", and were wider than she was tall. With their massive size, they should've had trouble maneuvering through the thick trees, yet they weren't. As each one encountered a gap in the trees too small to fit through, Jennifer saw their armor _compress_ until the creature was thin enough to get through, then expand back into its original shape once clear of the gap. The motion looked sickening to Jennifer, almost as if the things had no bones.

It was when the things finally reached the group, Jennifer managed to get a good look at them. The things were covered from head to toe in

thick armor that was the same mottled green the surrounding forest was. The faceplates were completely featureless, and thick tentacle-like structures protruded from their backs, waving softly like the fronds of a sea anemone. Each one had a massive shield on one arm, and a weapon on the other. Their order was reversed on each one: one had some kind of combination weapon with a 3-barreled machine gun for a right arm, and the other had some kind of autocannon replacing its left. In addition, behind the shoulder of each weapon arm, was what appeared to be a large camera, while the shoulders opposite the weapon arms had what appeared to be a large mortar or howitzer pointing nearly straight up.

The two things were now staring at Jennifer in silence. To say that it was making her a little uneasy was like saying a mouse cornered by a cat was a little nervous. For several moments, Jennifer was speechless.

Then the silence was broken, but not by Jennifer.

"You two definitely took your time getting here," Kitty said. "Did you get hung up on something?"

"_We_ were not hung on any object, as there is none in this area that can support _our_ weight," one of the things said.

"We believe that this human refers to the action of being obstructed," the other said.

"Understood. Then _we_ were not obstructed," the first one said.

Jennifer found their voices to be strange and a bit mesmerizing. So deep were they, that it was more like she was feeling their voices through her bones than actually hearing them.

She quickly shook herself off though. "Okay, what the fuck are you two? Some kind of robots?" she asked.

Both things turned in unison towards her. "_We_ firmly deny the absurd notion that we are mechanical beings," they said in unison.

'_Could've fooled me,'_ Jennifer thought.

"They're the Hunters. Technically, they're called Mgalekgolo, but they don't mind being called Hunters," Asada answered.

Jennifer looked the two beings over. "What in Hades are you two supposed to hunt?"

"Anything and everything," the first one replied calmly.

Jennifer shivered in response. It sounded like it really meant it. "So, do you two have name then, or should I just call you two Tweedledee and Tweedledum?" she joked nervously.

"We are Nogata Sara Zurru," replied the first one.

"We are Togumi Sara Taso," replied the second.

Jennifer scratched her head in confusion. "What's with the 'we'? How many of you guys are in there?" she asked jokingly.

"Ten thirties and twenty-eight-thirtieth," Nogata replied.

"Eleven thirties and three-thirtieth," Togumi replied.

Jennifer tried to figure out what kind of bizarre numbers the "Hunters" were spouting.

"You would know them as three hundred, twenty eight and three hundred, thirty three respectively," Togumi offered helpfully.

Jennifer stared at them for a few moments before turning to Asada for answers.

Kitty merely shrugged. "It's complicated and we don't have time for an explanation, unless you don't mind letting that 'night witch' girl die while we're standing around talking?"

Jennifer turned towards Kitty with a look of fury on her face. "Of course not! You think I'm just going to leave a comrade to her death? Hades, no! What kind of a Marine would I be if I did that?"

Jennifer and Kitty stared at each other for what seemed like forever before Kitty nodded. "Good answer," Kitty said before she turned to her fellow soldiers. "We're Oscar Mike now. Everyone get moving."

The other three nodded and their camoskins reactivated, turning them nearly invisible once more as they faded into the background. Jennifer started as the two Hunters-

'_Or Miggle-lek-goes, or whatever she called them,'_ she thought.

-moved ahead of the barely visible soldiers, and their armor shifted into the same forest camouflage pattern the other soldiers had. Though their size made them difficult to hide, Jennifer found that they became more and more difficult to tell apart from the surrounding foliage as they walked further and further away. Even their heavy footsteps were becoming harder to identify.

"Listen up," Kitty said, snapping Jennifer out of her trance. "Stay right behind me and get too far away. Otherwise, you'll get lost in here pretty quickly. Understood?"

Jennifer took one look at the thick trees and bushes, and nodded. "Yeah, got it."

"Good," said Kitty as her armor shifted colors to match the surrounding forest. "Let's go."

And so Jennifer followed closely behind the barely visible Kitty, marveling once more at how effective the "camoskin" was.

It was more effective than she realized, for Jennifer completely failed to notice the camouflaged Mule unmanned ground vehicle tracking her with its M247H2-HB machine gun. It was one of several

that had been deployed around the grounded MOREIV to serve as mobile sentry guns. Their usual cloven hooves had been replaced with long, curved claws that allowed them to dig into the soft soil to better absorb the heavy recoil from their 12.7mm machine guns while firing, and their usual saddlebags had been replaced with a folding gun shield that was not only made of five centimeters of alternating layers of Titanium-A and heat-refractory ceramic, but also incorporated shield generators in its design, making it effective at absorbing both projectile and directed energy fire. This particular Mule had orders not to fire on Jennifer unless attacked, but it still kept an "eye" on her just in case.

Neither did Jennifer notice the DURANDAL suit watching her from a camouflaged position nearby, tracking her with the insect-like sensor pod that made up its head. Though the DURANDAL should've been easy to spy due to looking like a 3 meters tall metal gorilla, the fact that it was crouching in a DURANDAL-sized foxhole lined with local foliage and covered with a camoskin tarp negated its size issue. The DURANDAL wasn't pointing its handheld (by a DURANDAL's definition of handheld) weapon at Jennifer, but the sensor pod was equipped with a coaxial 7.62mm machine gun. Granted, there was nothing the operator could do about it aside from tearing the gun off, but stillâ€¦

Satisfied that Jennifer wasn't going to run off or suddenly turn hostile, both Mule and DURANDAL returned to their normal patrols.

* * *

><p>Somewhere in the Ardennes Forest

12 minutes laterâ€¦

At long last, Kitty had eyes on the crash site. Had she and her team been alone, or even with just the Mgalekgolo, they'd have been at the site in less than 5 minutes. The presence of Jennifer DeBlanc though hindered their progress, as her unarmored uniform and skin caught at every branch and her lack of powered exoskeleton meant that Jennifer just could not move as quickly as the UNSC Marines. At one point, Kitty had found it to be faster to carry Jennifer through some thick foliage than it was for her to negotiate it on her own.

In any case, the situation didn't look good. A body lied crumpled on the ground on a tree root, still and unmoving.

She wasn't the only who'd seen the body though.

"Shit!" Jennifer hissed as she saw the girl lying there. There was no hesitation as she bolted forward towards the body.

"Muffin, Snapshot, Zurru, Taso, secure the area. Princess, with me," Kitty ordered.

As Kitty's teammates and the Mgalekgolo set up positions around the crash site, Kitty and Princess rushed forward to where Jennifer was crouched over the body, her face looked as though it was carved in stone.

Kitty could see why. The blond girl, the "night witch", was lying completely still; her legs bare and without the "magic" flying machines Jennifer and Heinrike had. Her right arm was severed at the

shoulder, which didn't have much more than a stump left still dripping with blood. Her neck was bent at an unnatural angle and blood trickled from the corner of her mouth, likely from a tooth cutting the inside of her cheek. Her chocolate brown eyes were wide open in eternal shock. Through the GRAM suit's air intakes, Kitty could smell the all-too-familiar stench of urine and feces, caused by the evacuation of the girl's bowels upon death.

Kitty had been a Marine long enough to know that death was never the pretty, clean thing they showed in holo-shows. There was no dignity for the deceased. Still, seeing a teenage girlâ€"a mere childâ€"dead like this awoke fury in her heart, something that came rarely to the normally calm ODS. The fury was directed both at whoever shot the girl down, and whoever forced a kid like her to go to war.

"She's dead," Jennifer said wearily. "Broke her neck when she crashed. She died instantly. At least it was quick."

Princess barely needed to examine the body. Even without being her fireteam's medic, she could tell Jennifer was right. "I concur. Time of death is 0419 hours. May God rest her soul."

Jennifer nodded, too tired to care which god Princess was referring to. She reached over and closed the blond witch's eyes for the last time.

Everyone was silent for a moment.

"There was nothing you could've done, DeBlanc," Kitty consoled.

"No, there wasn't," Jennifer said bitterly. "Even if she hadn't broken her neck, she would've bled out by the time we got here. I can't heal the dead, but damn it, I wish to fuckin' Asclepius I could!" The last words came out as an anguished cry.

Jennifer trembled as she tried to control her emotions. _'Marines do not cry. They do not! No matter how many of us fall, we will press onward until the enemy is destroyed,'_ she told herself.

Suddenly, Jennifer felt a pressure on her shoulder. She looked up to see Kitty's armored hand with a firm, but gentle grip on her shoulder. It felt comforting to Jennifer, and she was grateful for it.

Jennifer sniffed, and wiped away the beginnings of tears from her eyes before they got any further. She looked once more at the still form of the blond night witch before turning to Kitty. "I know I'm asking a lot here, but would you mind helping me get this girl back to Allied lines? Marines don't leave anyone behind, not even their bodies. And her parents deserve to have a body to bury rather than a coffin filled with sandbags."

Kitty nodded. It was a sentiment she could understand. "Sure," she replied out loud to Jennifer before switching to subvocals. "Togumi, get over here and carry this girl. Carefully."

"Affirmative. We will treat this corpse with the respect your species seems to have for your dead," the Mgalekgolo rumbled back as it walked over to them.

Togumi had only taken a few steps when something smashed into Kitty's chest, hard, causing her suit's energy shield to flash orange. The shield managed to briefly hold back the kinetic energy of the projectile before it reached its limit and collapsed. She felt her ribs crack as she was thrown to the ground from the force of the projectile, and she dimly realized through the pain that her energy shield was what had saved her from a sudden end to her story.

Though Kitty was indisposed at the moment, others had quicker reaction times and experience to go with it.

"Sniper!" Princess shouted as she threw herself into prone position.

The other two needed no other warning. They ducked right into cover behind the closest tree as soon as they heard Princess's warning. The Mgalekgolo, on the other hand, did the opposite. They walked right out into the open and generally made themselves as clear a target as possible. The pair knew that due to their heavy armor and powerful energy shields, any attack against them was unlikely to do enough damage that the Mgalekgolo would be incapacitated, allowing them to quickly return fire. Often with deadly results.

Togumi, in particular, quickly walked in between the downed Kitty and the direction of the shot, intent on preventing any further sniping attempts from succeeding.

Jennifer, meanwhile, quickly went over to Kitty. Princess followed just as quickly. "Shit, you okay?! Tell me you're alive!" Jennifer said frantically.

Kitty coughed and examined her HUD readouts before turned her head to look at the worried face of Jennifer DeBlanc. She winced in pain as the movement aggravated her injury before speaking. "Yeah, I'm alive. Kind of wish I wasn't right now, but here I am. Still kicking," Kitty joked.

"If you've got the energy to joke around, then perhaps you have the energy to tell me where it hurts?" Princess asked jokingly, though both Kitty and Jennifer could hear the worry underneath the light-hearted banter.

"Oh, yeah. My chest. Suit's saying I got a couple of fractured ribs, and that I should inject some painkillers. I'm finding I agree with that assessment."

Jennifer marveled briefly at whatever kind of armor allowed it to tell its wearer what kind of injuries she has before shaking herself. "Hold on, I can heal you." She looked to Princess, who was staring at her through the polarized visor. "Please. I have magic that can heal her. Just let me use it."

Princess sighed. "I'm sorry, it's not that I don't believe you, but this 'magic' business just sounds so€¦fantastic." Princess shook her head before turning to Kitty. "Well, Kitty? Your call," she said.

Kitty looked at Jennifer before another stab of pain came from her fractured ribs. She had to wait a second before speaking. "Alright. Do your magic thingy. Just know I'll hunt you down if it goes

wrong."

Jennifer grinned. "Don't worry. I've done this lots of times. I know what I'm doing."

With that said, Jennifer began. She concentrated and called out Cazadora, her familiar, which manifested as a pair of floppy ears springing from the tops of her head and a long, wiry tail emerging from the base of her spine: both typical features of the Galgo Espa ol. As she felt Cazadora stabilize her magic, Jennifer then placed her hands on Kitty's breastplate, right on the spot that no longer matched surrounding camouflage pattern. Her hands began glowing with a soft light. She then felt the magic flow through Kitty's armor and into her body, and then she directed it into the fractured ribs.

Princess watched the whole process with as much concentration as she could divert, trying to divide it between watching the surrounding the environment for any signs that the sniper was going to finish the job, monitoring Kitty's vitals via her suit feed, and double-checking to make sure her VISR system was recording the whole thing.

The closest Kitty could describe what happened next was liquid fire pouring into her body from where Jennifer had her hands on her and concentrating into her fractured ribs. For a moment, Kitty's right hand twitched towards her M6M, but then she stopped and relaxed as the pain in her ribs melted away like snow under the rays of the noonday sun.

"Huh, so that's what this 'magic' of yours feels like," Kitty calmly said.

"Yup, so I'd appreciate it if you could try not to shoot me," Jennifer said, seeing Kitty's hand go for her pistol, which a small part of Jennifer's mind thought was ridiculously huge.

Underneath her helmet, Kitty grinned. "I'll try not to shoot on reflex as long as I'm not surprised again. Still though, this feels  nice. It felt weird at the beginning. A bit painful actually, but now I'm not even hurting," she said.

"Yep. A lot of people say healing feels like that. I've heard there's a new witch on the block who's healing feels good the whole time though. What's her name? Miyanashi, or something like that."

Princess just continued to watch the magic at work, now with more concentration than ever. "Amazing," she breathed. "Your ribs are knitting together at a remarkable rate. It's almost as if I'm watching a medical instruction holo that's been put on fast-forward."

Jennifer briefly wondered what a "medical instruction hollow" was before shaking her head and lifted her hands from Kitty's breastplate, ending the glow and the flow of magic. "There. That should do it. Give the magic a few days to work, and your ribs will be good as new. Just don't move around so much or you'll aggravate the injury."

"Good idea, but I'm going to have to violate those orders for now."

Kitty got back to her feet into a crouching position with only a brief grunt. The movement had caused the pain to return, but it was a dull, throbbing feeling compared to the sharp, biting agony it was just a few seconds ago. Despite the pain, Kitty gritted her teeth and pressed on. "I've got a sniper to catch," she said quietly.

Jennifer started to reach out to hold her down, but an armored hand clasped her arm and prevented it from moving further. Jennifer turned to see Princess, her expression unreadable as ever behind that face-concealing helmet and visor. "But-" Jennifer started to protest.

Princess shook her head. "We have a job to do, and we'll jump into hell and back to do it. That's how we work."

Jennifer started to open her mouth to ask what kind of an organization would preach that kind of doctrine when she realized the irony of her own question. She realized the US Marine Corps operated like that, and that realization made her realize that these people were Marines, regardless of what they called themselves.

Kitty noticed this not as she placed her MA5F on her back-mounted Geckopad holder, and swapped it out for her SRS99K. "Muffin, Snapshot, did either of you see where the shot came from?" she asked using subvocals.

"**Negative. I didn't see any flash or hear anything like a gunshot,**" Muffin replied.

"**Probably using an integrated suppressor,**" Snapshot added. "**Whoever it was fired one shot and one shot only. Likely displaced afterwards if he's following his MO.**"

"A pity. Zurru, Taso, I don't suppose you two got a read on the guy?"

"Negative," both answered in unison.

"We regretfully inform you that the sniper is beyond our range of detection," Taso reported.

Kitty frowned. She did not like smart enemies. She admired them, but she preferred to do so after they've been safely neutralized. She decided to do one of the most recommended things when faced with a hostile sniper: call in air support.

"Kitty to Basecamp, do you copy?" she radioed, using her callsign.

"**Go ahead, ma'am.**"

"Is that Ghost Owl still circling us? If so, get it to start an IR scan of the area aboutâ€|" She quickly did the math in her head. "100 meters to our northwest then continue scanning while circling towards the same direction, over."

A few seconds passed before she got her answer.

"**Affirmative,**" came the emotionless voice of Sergeant Heather O'Leary. "**Albert heading over there and is scanning now.**"

It was a few moments before O'Leary reported in.

"**Uh, let seeâ€|nope, that's a deer. There's another deer, and oh, I gotâ€|shit, just a squirrel. Freakin' tree rat,** O'Leary said.

"Mouse," Kitty said, using O'Leary's callsign. "You do realize that you don't have to broadcast everything you find, right? Just report back if you find the snipe-"

"**Got something!**" O'Leary interrupted, her usual monotone broken in favor of something like excitement for once. "**Ghost Owl is tracking a heat source moving to the southeast at about 10 kph. It's pretty bright, bright enough to shine through the overhead foliage. Albert is circling around to get a better view now andâ€|what the hell is that thing?"**

"What?" Kitty asked.

"**Not sure. Something weird. Sending Albert's video feed to you now.**"

A small window opened in Kitty's HUD and quickly filled the top-right corner, covering the minimap of the local area normally set as the default image. The window displayed a real time, overhead video feed of the forest in the false color view of an infrared camera. The view was constantly centered on a small, white-hot point of light moving quickly through the dark blue forest.

'_Wow, that's hot. Is that sniper carrying a fusion reactor or what?_' Kitty thought.

However, the matter of the sniper's temperature was overshadowed by his, or rather its, physical appearance. It looked like a bulky humanoid creature with a flat, insectoid head and what looked like a long-barreled rifle in place of its right arm. The end of its left arm was tipped with a 4-fingered claw. It moved through the trees with speed and grace, using its two prehensile feet to grip branches before swinging across gaps like a monkey.

"Yep, I'd definitely call that 'weird'," Kitty said flatly.

"What's weird?" Jennifer asked.

"The sniper, that's what." Kitty proceeded to give a short description of the sniper.

"Sounds kind of like a Fiddler, but the feet don't match. Maybe a new variant?" Jennifer muttered.

"Fiddler?" Kitty asked.

"Infantry Neuroi. One of their most common models. Just taller than a man, and a lot bulkier too. Usually has a machine gun for a right arm, but-" Then a thought struck Jennifer. "Wait, don't tell me you don't know what the Neuroi are either?"

'_So that's what a 'Newroy' looks like,_' Kitty thought. Out loud, she said, "Pretend I don't and explain."

Jennfier sighed. "Seriously? The alien invaders that first landed in 1914? Those Neuroi?"

Every member of Kitty's fireteam blinked in surprise.

"**Hey, Kitty? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure aliens didn't invade until the H-C War,**" Snapshot subvocalized.

"You're not wrong. These 'Newroy' guys are early by about 600 years," Kitty subvocalized back.

Jennifer, meanwhile, sighed. "I'm guessing the silence means you girls haven't heard about the Neuroi? Ever?"

More silence greeted Jennifer.

'_Okay, of all things to not know about, how in Hades do they not know about the Neuroi? They made headlines literally everywhere when they invaded. Have they been living under a rock this whole time or-'
_A chill ran down Jennifer's spine. _'Or these guys aren't from this world.'_

Kitty shook her head. "It doesn't matter anyway. Since this 'Newroy' sniper decided to fire on me without so much as a call for surrender, I might as well return the favor."

She then proceeded to do one of the other most recommended things when facing enemy snipers: call in artillery support.

"Taso, target the hostile sniper with your mortar. Load HEDP," Kitty ordered.

Members of the colony then manipulated the controls of the M512 81mm electromagnetic mortar sitting just behind its right shoulder. Jennifer watched in fascination as the mortar's chamber slid open, and then the autoloader whirred into life, loading one of the olive-green, yellow-tipped rounds into the chamber before it slid back into position with a click.

"HEDP loaded," Taso rumbled.

"You may fire when ready," Kitty ordered.

And so Taso did, with a single Lekgolo operating the electronic trigger. Several rings of magnetic coils activated, fed by a series of high energy capacitors. The closest coil pulled the round through it before shutting down and allowing the next coil to activate and pull the round towards it. This sequence repeated itself throughout the mortar's barrel until the mortar round finally exited the barrel at just under the speed of sound, producing zero noise during its entire operation.

The mortar round flew high into the air on a parabolic arc. With zero launch signature, there was no heat to trace back to the launch vehicle. Only fire-finding radar could track the round's flightpath now, and no radar of the day was accurate enough.

At least, the UNSC assumed soâ€¦|

* * *

><p>About 300 meters above the Ardennes Forest

Heidemarie Schnaufer started in surprise as her magic radar picked up the small object hurtling into the air almost straight up. As did the other night witches.

"What was that?"Heidemarie asked.

Courvoisier observed the high angle the projectile came from.
"Mortar. Only one of those has such a high parabolic trajectory. Around 81-82 millimeters from the radar return."

Did we have anyone stationed here? Mainard asked.

***As far as I know, we don't,"** Courvoisier said.

Is it the Neuroi? Bloch asked.

***Possibly, but-"**

"_**Gut."**_Bloch then banked sharply in the direction where the mortar round came from.

Bloch, where are you going? Mainard asked sharply.

***Revenge," **Bloch said before accelerating away.

The tone of Bloch's voice chilled Heidemarie to the bone. It was the sound of someone who was letting hate consume her.

"_**Merde!**_**" **Courvoisier swore. It was the first time Heidemarie had ever heard the Gallian witch swear. **"Everyone, follow Bloch! Don't let her do anything rash!"**

Heidemarie gunned her striker's engines, as did everyone else. They had to get to Bloch before she got to whoever fired that mortar. Heidemarie only hoped they weren't too late.

* * *

><p>3,140 meters above the Ardennes Forestâ€|

The 81mm HEDP mortar round continued on its fateful, parabolic flight. When it reached the apex of the parabola, small fins unfolded along the body and the multi-spectral camera on its nose opened its protective shutter. The fins angled the round until it was pointing almost straight down. Staring at the forest below, the camera locked onto the pre-sighted heat signature of the sniper.

As it confirmed its target, the round began its downward plunge. Faster and faster it fell; the wind whistling through its stubby fins as the camera's gaze remained locked firmly on its target's white-hot glow.

Had the mortar round been capable of thought, all of its cognitive ability would've been devoted solely to closing with its rapidly

moving target, like a falcon diving towards a helpless mouse. Had it been capable of emotion, it would have felt a sense of anticipation. Had it been capable of expressing that emotion, it would've had a predatory grin on its face.

And so it fell to its destiny.

* * *

><p>Somewhere in the Ardennes Forestâ€|

"Unit M-12093-I2X requesting permission to communicate with FCV _Bringer of Life_. Subject: four new units of Species 6802 and two new units of unknown species encountered. Transmission priority: Urgent."

It waited 50 microseconds for a reply before it realized there were no aerial units within range to relay its communications back to the ship. It quickly changed course and headed towards a distant hill in the hopes of the altitude being enough to allow its signal to reach an appropriate unit for relay.

Unit M-12093-I2X never detected the 81mm mortar round incoming, and it certainly did not detect the round smashing into its sensor head until it was already impacting.

Upon impact, a contact sensor sent a signal that detonated explosives in the HEAT portion of the HEDP round. The explosives forcing a conical lining of copper alloy to compress into a hollow cavity, forcing it into a narrow jet of metal travelling at 25 times the speed of sound. The jet, rated to penetrate up to 125 millimeters of Titanium-A, punched through the sensor head, through the neck, into the chest, through the red, crystalline dodecahedron sitting in the middle of the chest; and finally out the crotch.

It was not a good day for Unit M-12093-I2X. Fortunately, it was over pretty quick. Instantly, in fact.

By the time it was over, Unit M-12093-I2X had been turned into countless white shards scattered throughout the immediate area, along with quite a bit of charred splinters from the tree it was standing on and countless high velocity fragments from the mortar shell's casing.

* * *

><p>Somewhere else in the Ardennes Forestâ€|

The sound of the distant explosion reached Kitty and the group as she watched the video feed on her HUD.

She smiled in satisfaction at the results of the mortar impact. "Target destroyed. Good shot, Taso. First time I've ever seen a guy shatter into glass before though."

"Yeah, Neuroi do that when you hit them hard enough," Jennifer said. "Not sure if it's actually glass though. Going to have to ask some someone smarter than me about that."

Kitty chuckled. "Probably, kid. Keep your head down though. Don't

want to get it shot off."

Jennifer started in surprise. "Wait, didn't you just kill that Neuroi? You said it shattered, right?"

"Yep, I did," Kitty said. "But think about it. Snipers always operate in pairs. One does the actual sniping, and the other watches her back. I'm figure these Newroy-"

"Uh, they're called Neuroi. N-E-U-R-O-I. I don't know who said they were called Newroy-"

"It was Johnson," Kitty helpfully provided.

"â€|Yeah, I knew it. The point is: they're called Neuroi. Don't know who first called them that or why, but yeah."

Asada sighed. "Right. Continuing on, I figure these Neuroi would do the same-"

Asada stopped as the buzz of a propeller began to fill the air.

"Everyone, stay down," Asada ordered.

But it was too lateâ€|

* * *

><p>About 250 meters above the Ardennes Forest and descendingâ€|

Obergefreiter Tresa Bloch felt nothing but a cold fury burn into her soul, immolating the once good humor she used to display.

She had served with _Major_ Valerie KrÃ¼ger since 1939, when Karlsland was evacuating as many of its citizens as it can to its overseas colonies in South Liberion in the wake of the fall of Ostmark. Back then, the _Major_ had seemed like an invincible goddess of battle to the then 11-year old _Soldat_ Bloch. Over time, this relationship had evolved into a comfortable one between officer and senior enlisted, where Bloch managed things at the individual level while KrÃ¼ger worked with the larger formations. Bloch had even teased her commander when she started dating Courvoisier.

Even then though, Bloch had thought of KrÃ¼ger as a permanent fixture in the world; something that would always exist until RagnarÃ¶k came and they would fight on the side of the gods against the eternal night.

Until that moment Schnaufer told them KrÃ¼ger had been shot out of the sky.

Even then, Bloch couldn't believe it. She could not believe that Valerie KrÃ¼ger was dead.

Until she saw KrÃ¼ger's body lying there, in a patch of earth darkened by her own blood, with a Neuroi standing over her. Bloch had never seen this type of Neuroi before. It looked around the size of an infantry Neuroi, but if so it was one of the largest infantry

Bloch had ever seen. Its left arm ended in a cannon while its right ended in a massive shield that covered most of its body. Tentacles waved on its back like some kind of horrid sea creature as it turned to face her.

The Neuroi's appearance was a secondary matter to her though, compared to the sight of KrÃ¼ger's broken body lying at its feet, as though it were trying to desecrate her body. Bloch had heard of that happening sometimes, when Neuroi were trying to recover metals from human corpses. She'd seen a body who been decapitated because the Neuroi had ripped the poor man's dog tags off with such force, the head came off with it.

Well she wasn't going to let that happen to her commander. Not now, not ever!

"Get away from her, you monster!" Bloch screamed as she lifted up her MK 108 autocannon, braced the improvised stock against her shoulder, lined up the sight with the Neuroi, and pulled the trigger.

The MK 108 began firing with its distinctive jackhammer-like pounding, digging into her shoulder and spitting out 30x90RB mm _MinengeschoÃŸ_[4] shells at a rate of 650 rounds per minute. Bloch had compensated for the MK 108's low muzzle velocity and highly downward-curving trajectory by waiting until she was less than 100 meters away before pulling the trigger.

The green tracers streamed towards the Neuroi, but Bloch was shocked to see it bring it suddenly swing its shield up to cover itself in the fraction of a second before the rounds, travelling at 540 meters per second, hit. Each 30mm shell was filled with 85 grams of pentaerythritol tetranitrate, but that's too long and complicated so we'll call it PETN instead. PETN was one of the most powerful explosives known to man. Being 1.66 times more powerful than the equivalent mass of TNT helps with that.

The result? The Neuroi was engulfed in explosions like a fireworks display gone horribly wrong.

Bloch smiled grimly. _'There's no way that infantry Neuroi could've survived tha-'_

Then through the smoke, Bloch saw movement. As she flew overhead, she saw the Neuro emerge from the smoke, still moving! True, it had sunken to one knee and soot and gouges covered its armored skin, but otherwise it looked unharmed.

"_ScheiÃŸe!_" Bloch cursed. "What the hell is that thing made of?!"

She'd underestimated the Neuroi's armor because of its small size. No more. She swung around and prepared to strafe the Neuro again, and make sure it was dead this time.

Suddenly, she heard a loud, bellowing roar. The sound shook her to the bone; she could almost feel the rage and fury in it as though it were a physical force. She looked around frantically for its source.

She spotted it: another one of those super-tough infantry Neuroi.

This one though had some kind of 3-barreled gun on its right arm, and it was pointed directly at her.

She barely had time to bring her shield up before the Neuroi's gun spun up and began firing. The sound was like a giant piece of cloth being ripped apart and almost drowned out the Neuroi's roar with its terrifying noise. Red tracers spewed out of the tri-barreled gun and smashed into her shield. She felt as though a professional boxer was laying into her with a flurry of punches; knocking the wind out of her as she tried to keep her thoughts straight.

Through the intense pain, she put her strikers on full throttle to try and escape the storm of bullets before her magic shield gave out. She was so concentrated on escaping that it took her a few seconds to realize that the fire had stopped, almost as abruptly as it had begun.

Curious, Bloch turned around to see why the Neuroi had stopped firing. The Neuroi was still tracking her with that tri-barreled gun, but it was no longer firing for some reason.

She grinned a savage grin and brought her MK 108 back up to fire again. She had no idea what the Neuroi was thinking, or maybe it was out of ammo, but she wasn't going to let this chance to avenge KrÃ¼ger escape her.

Suddenly, before Bloch could pull the trigger, the MK 108 was jerked up and to the side, away from the Neuroi she'd been about to shoot. She then found herself staring into the face of Marielle Courvoisier, with a look of uncharacteristically pure fury on her beautiful face.

"Stand down," Courvoisier ordered.

"But-"

"I said, 'Stand down', _Obergefreiter_ Bloch." There was unbridled fury in Courvoisier's voice, something Bloch had never heard before.

"But the Neuroi, they-"

Courvoisier proceeded to do something else Bloch hadn't seen her do before: she grabbed Bloch's head and pointed it at the Neuroi.

"Do they look like Neuroi to you? Do they honestly look like Neuroi to you?" Courvoisier said angrily. "And did you even notice the people taking cover behind the 'Neuroi' because you couldn't tell the difference?"

Bloch was about to ask "What people?!" when she saw it: three humans coming out from behind the first "Neuroi" she shot at. Two of them were wearing some kind of dark-colored armor while the third was dressed in US Marine Corps dress blues?! Bloch's face paled as she realized that the one in USMC uniform was none other than Captain Jennifer DeBlanc: the very night witch they'd been sent to find!

"Did you notice her yet?" Courvoisier asked, having calmed herself down slightly, but still gripping Bloch's head like a clamp.

Bloch nodded wordlessly.

"Good." Courvoisier released her iron grip on Bloch's head. "Now come with us. We're going to find out just who or what these people are, and what they are doing with Captain DeBlanc."

Bloch could only nod again as she followed her commander down towards the group of people and those "Neuroi". So great was her shock, that Bloch didn't even notice Schnaufer and Mainard flank her on the way down. Neither of them said a word to Bloch, which only worsened the guilt.

* * *

><p>At KrÃ¼ger's crash siteâ€|

Kitty watched as the group of girls descended towards her group and hovered a few centimeters above the ground. The four girls seemed to have a varied appearance and were heavily armed with autocannons modified with grips and triggers for human use. Two of them were dressed in black German Luftwaffe uniform and the other two were in blue French Air Force uniform, and their features were just as varied.

One of the Germans had skin so pale it was almost white, and her eyes were an eerie blood-red. Her chest-length hair was just as pale as her skin, and a pair of feathered ear tufts extended from the top of her head. Kitty thought she was albino from those features, other than the eyes and ears of course. The 15-16 year old-looking girl mostly stared at the ground, with her gaze occasionally darting to her, her team members, and the Hunters; almost as if she was afraid to look them in the eye. She also had a set of glowing, branching antennae-like projections around her head shaped like the old Lichtenstein radar sets. Considering that these girls were somehow emitting radar waves earlier, Kitty assumed those antennae were how they did it. The "how" was a bit fuzzy to her, but that was for the eggheads to figure out.

The other German looked about 18-19. She had short black hair and forest green eyes, with skin almost as pale as the albino girl's. A pair of pointed, triangular ears extended from her head. Her gaze darted to the Mgalekgolo, especially to Taso and the joints of their armor with the mostly dried rivulets of luminescent orange blood running down the punctures in the flexible carbon nanoweave [5], with her fluffy tail curled up beneath her and a look of guilt written on her face. She too had those antennae around her head, glowing like tritium sights.

One of the French girls looked about 16-17, and had dirty blond hair cropped very short, almost to a buzz-cut. Her animal ears were long and floppy, and hung down the sides of her head. Instead of the Lichtenstein radar antennae the two German girls had, this one had a glowing circle around her right eye with a line rotating clockwise in it, similar to a Plan Position Indicator-type radar display. Her blue eyes were alert and watching Kitty, Princess, and the Mgalekgolo warily, likely for any signs of hostility. Kitty approved.

Finally, the other French girl, an 18-19 year old with long, hazel-colored hair and pale green eyes also with a circular radar

display around the right, hovered forward until she was the closest to eye level with Jennifer as her "strickers" would permit.

Jennifer, upon seeing the insignia on the French girl's uniform, stood up straight and at attention: eyes forward, heels together, feet exactly thirty degrees apart, hands at the sides; just like how they taught it back in basic training.

"Relax, Captain DeBlanc. I am glad to see you are alive and well. At least, I trust that is the case, correct?" the girl asked in clear English with only the slightest tinge of a French accent to it, casting a wary eye at the armored forms of Kitty and Princess.

"Yes, ma'am," Jennifer said as she relaxed her stance. She then noticed the girl's looks at the armored soldiers. "These guys, I mean girls, helped me find the night witch's body here. Without them, I never would've known where to look."

At the mention of the body, every one of the girls that'd come down turned to look the broken body of the blond girl still lying next to Taso's feet.

Jennifer shook her head. "I'm sorry, she was already dead when we found her. Iâ€¦I didn't even know her name. Who was she?"

"KrÃ¼ger," the hazel-headed girl answered in a dazed voice, as though she couldn't quite process the sight before her. "Valerie KrÃ¼ger. Major of the Kaiserliche LuftstreitkrÃ¶fte of Karlsland. She is-was, a fine officer and a good partner."

Silence reigned for a minute. Then the girl straightened and turned towards the armored soldiers.

"I am Commandant Marielle Courvoisier of the ArmÃ©e de l'air [6] of Gallia," the girl said in a calm voice. "Which one of you is the commander of thisâ€¦force?"

Kitty stepped forward. "I am Gunnery Sergeant Shinon Asada, callsign: Amazon One, personal callsign: Kitty. The nation I am a part of is classified though, pending orders from my superiors."

'_So Kitty's Fusooan? If she is, then her Britannish is the best I've ever heard a Fusooan speak,'_ Jennifer thought.

"I'm pretty sure they're Liberians though," Jennifer added, making everything look at her. "What? It's the name and the accent. You guys and girls sure as Hades don't sound like Britannians."

Kitty merely shrugged. "I'm neither confirming nor denying that. I'm just telling you it's above my pay grade."

Courvoisier's mouth twitched in amusement. "If I have to speak to your superior for that information, then I would like to do so? If would be so kind as to direct us to him? Or her, of course, considering your gender."

Kitty smiled underneath her helmet. "We were actually just on our way to him right now. If you'll follow us, then we'll take you girls to hi-"

"We regretfully interrupt your speech to report the presence of incoming artillery shells," Taso announced suddenly.

That announcement got everyone's attention.

"Altitude, now-!" Courvoisier shouted.

"Wait, don't!" Kitty interrupted, stopping the girls from taking off, literally.

As Courvoisier started to ask why, Zurru and Taso went into action. Jennifer watched as the camera-like devices on their shoulders traversed and shutters on the lenses opened up.

The terrible whistling sounds of falling artillery shells was suddenly cut off as explosions rocked the sky above them in rapid succession like a fireworks display. Jennifer quickly activated her magic radar, and she saw the incoming rounds disappear one after the other so quickly it was almost as if there was an invisible barrier intercepting the shells at a certain distance from them.

Most of the witches present were watching the fireworks with a look of shock and awe on their faces. Courvoisier merely looked with her magic radar for any signs that any shells were making it through before turning to Kitty. "So would you care to explain why those shells are apparently exploding for no discernable reason?" she asked.

"M6T Grindell/Galilean Pulse Laser Cannons," Kitty answered, looking at the laser cannons still firing their invisible barrages at the incoming shells on the Mgalekgolos' shoulders. "Variable wavelength free electron laser. Five-zero kilojoules per shot: about the same amount of energy released by a 20mm autocannon round, but divided into over a thousand pulses and concentrated into a one centimeter beam. They're also currently near infrared, so you can't see them. Had you girls taken off, those lasers would've shot you down like those artillery shells, and you would've never known what was killing you."

Courvoisier's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying your 'lazer cannons' would've shot at us and you could not even halt their fire?" she asked, accidentally mangling the pronunciation of "laser".

"We sincerely express our apologies," Taso rumbled, causing the night witches to turn to the alien in surprise. "The laser cannons utilize a radar system that operates autonomously in order to intercept fast moving targets. We regretfully report we would not be able to react fast enough to stop it should it fire at a target."

"Not that we would regret it if the angry female human adolescent larvae is reduced to sub-sentience," Zurru growled, clearly directing their anger at the black-haired German girl.

The German girl frowned and started to lift her autocannon before Courvoisier grabbed the barrel, stopping the motion cold.

"What do you think you're doing, Bloch?" Courvoisier hissed.

The German girl, apparently named Bloch, grimaced. "I was not going to shoot, I was just going to--"

"Threaten someone with a loaded weapon?" Princess guessed.

"Ye-" Bloch then realize her error. "I mean, no! I mean-"

"_Obergefreiter_ Bloch," Courvoisier said with a steely tone. "One more breach of discipline, and you will be returning to base. Am I clear?"

Bloch lowered her head in shame. "Yes, ma'am," she said.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the others, the Mgalekgolo pair had been conversing amongst themselves without a sound using a combination of electromagnetic waves and infrasound.

"**Nogata, we urgently implore you to cease your aggression,"
**Togumi said.

"**That human attempted to kill your whole. Any damage to the whole will be returned, this we truthfully swear,"** Nogata replied.

"**The damage to the whole was minimal and not irreparable. Indeed, we are already healing the injured and recycling the dead. In addition, humans cannot recover from damage as easily as **us**.
They are fragile beings. Do not return the damage to the human, as it would result in the permanent death of the whole rather than mere subsentience. Again, we implore you to retract your declaration of vengeance."**

For a few seconds, Nogata didn't answer. Then, "**We hesitantly agree, but only because you wish it. Any other attempts on
our**** lives by that human will be swiftly and mercilessly crushed."**

"**We understand and agree."**

"Everyone, could we perhaps stop fighting amongst ourselves and start looking for that forward observer? Unless you seriously think these 'Neuroi' just happened to drop artillery rounds right on our heads by coincidence?" Kitty asked.

Courvoisier nodded. "No, I didn't think so," she answered before turning to her witches. "Everyone, that spotter is around here somewhere. Eyes sharp and antennae out, girls. And always, keep your shields up." She then turned to Kitty. "I need you to get thoseâ€¦things to cease fire long enough for me to call for artillery support. If the Neuroi have moved artillery close enough to target us here, they could endanger other forces."

As soon as she finished though, more explosions rocked the sky, this time greater in number than before.

"Yeah, no can do," Kitty replied.

The night witch with the cropped blond hair hovered forward. "Then how do you expect us to deal with those artillery?" she said angrily.

Kitty sighed. She didn't want to do this this early in the mission, but it seemed like she had to. "Courvoisier, I have artillery available for fire missions. I'll call it in after we eliminate that forward observer."

Courvoisier blinked in surprise. "But radio signals are broken up in this forest. How will youâ€¦"

"I'll explain later. Now are you going to help us or not?" Kitty said irritably.

A tense few minutes passed by for the Marines and the night witches as they carefully looked around to try to see where the forward observer was. Artillery fire continued to rain down on them, and they continued to be intercepted by the Mgalekgolo's lasers. However, the number and frequency of the detonations was clearly increasing. The "Neuroi" were clearly devoting more and more artillery to try and eliminate the group. It would only be a matter of time before the point defense lasers would be overwhelmed. Now it was a race against time to see whether they'd find that forward observer first or the artillery would reach them.

Thenâ€¦

"**Got something,**" Snapshot subvocalized. "**Southwest. One-six-two-point-three meters away according to the rangefinder.**"

Kitty looked through the scope of her SRS99K in the direction Snapshot had indicated. There it was: a Neuroi similar to the one Taso had just splashed.

"Confirmed," Kitty replied. "One hostile Neuroi. Fiddler-class according to DeBlanc. Take it out."

"**Roger that.**"

Some distance away from Kitty, Snapshot laid prone on the mossy ground, M70 ASAR in hand. Behind her helmet, Snapshot had a grinâ€"the grin of a predatorâ€"on her face as she stroked the trigger. Electromagnetic coils instantly went to work, each one accelerating the 12.7x99mm ferrous tungsten-jacketed, depleted uranium bullet down the 75 cm long barrel until by the time it had left it the bullet was travelling at just over 3 km/s.

The sonic boom was loud enough to be heard by everyone around. The night witches present started in surprise at the sudden noise.

It took 0.0538 seconds to travel the distance between the rifle and the target. As the bullet smashed into the Neuroi, the hypervelocity impact created a flash of light and heat as plasma was discharged by the impact. So great was the bullet's muzzle velocity, that both impactor and impactee temporarily liquefied under the assault. The bullet traveled through the hard metallic shell of the Neuroi before emerging in the core chamber as a cloud of superheated plasma formed by a combination of the vaporized bullet jacket and equally vaporized armor. And of course, the depleted uranium penetrator, which survived the hypervelocity impact virtually intact.

The core didn't stand a chance. The DU penetrator bored a hole

through the crystalline material and emerged out the other side. The hole bored into the core began to crack outwards from the hole. Eventually, the core would've shattered from that damage alone, but it wasn't even allowed that.

When the DU penetrator reached the other side of the core chamber, it ran into the armored wall, and shattered. One of the things about depleted uranium that made it such a great anti-armor weapon was that it was both very hard and very fragile. This meant that the DU would often penetrate the first layer of armor, then shatter on the inside of the vehicle once it reached the next layer of armor. This caused fragments of DU to bounce around inside of the vehicle like high velocity razor blades. Oh yeah, and DU will also ignite upon exposure to air and/or water: a condition known as pyrophoricity. While the Neuroi's core chamber was normally kept in a vacuum, the hole just punched into it allowed air to rush in, and therefore the DU fragments were ignited as they came into contact with those molecules.

The plasma rushing in from the hole entrance didn't hurt either.

The entire Neuroi blew apart into glassy fragments, more from the effects of the hypervelocity impact than from the destruction of its core.

The witches looked in surprise as Snapshot stood up and faced them. They'd been completely unaware of Snapshot's presence up until now. The albino girl and the black haired girl were unable to do much more than stare at the newcomer, while Courvoisier and Mainard looked around for any more people hidden in the undergrowth.

"Target down," Snapshot reported with a satisfied tone.

Kitty nodded then stood up straight. A small antennae extended from the top of Kitty's helmet and she made the call. "Lawnmower, this is Amazon One, requesting fire mission, over."

It took only a second for the reply to come. "Amazon One this is Lawnmower FDC, fire mission request received, out," replied a calm male voice.

Every night witch present started in surprise. It wasn't the nature of the communications that surprised them, since it sounded like typical Liberian fire discipline terminology. No, it was the direction of the reply that surprised them. It had come from almost straight up.

Kitty noticed their looks, but ignored it for the time being to concentrate on the task at hand. She read aloud the coordinates obtained from the Mgalekgolo's point defense lasers' radars. They were not only good enough to intercept the incoming rounds, they could backtrack the rounds to their source, acting as impromptu counterbattery radars.

Each coordinate consisted of three separate parts: a number and a letter designating the grid zone, two more numbers indicating one of the 100,000 meter squares in the grid zone, and finally a series of numbers indicating how accurate the shot needed to be. In this case, a six-digit number was given, which was precise down to 100 meters.

The FDC repeated the coordinates given, then sent his own message to Kitty. **"Port dorsal turret one, KEP at three-zero kps in effect, one round, over."**

"Port dorsal turret one, KEP at three-zero kps in effect, one round, out," Kitty repeated.

"Shot, over."

"Shot, out," Kitty ended.

High above, orbiting at 300 kilometers above the planet surface, one of the UNSC *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*'s ten Mark 2563 Onager III twin turrets traversed to aim at the coordinates fed into it, then fired. A 50cm ferrous tungsten-jacketed, depleted uranium slug was accelerated out the one of the barrels via a series of electromagnetic, superconducting coils and exited at 30 kilometers per second, or over Mach 87.

"Lawnmower to Amazon One, ten seconds to impact, out," FDC calmly reported.

By now, the slug was already entering the atmosphere. The tip of the slug began to glow white-hot as it collided with air molecules, creating a sheathe of plasma around the slug and leaving a fiery trail behind it like a shooting star.

"Whoa, look at that!" Jennifer shouted as she pointed up at the sky.

All the night witches looked up as a meteor streaked from the sky. It quickly grew bigger and bigger as it got closer and closer until finally, it disappeared from view over the horizon.

A fraction of a second later, a flash lit the sky, turning night into day for a brief moment as the energy of about one and a quarter kiloton's worth of TNT was liberated by the hypervelocity impact.

Meanwhile, the artillery fire continued for several more seconds as the shells already fired continued on their course unaware and uncaring of what had happened to their firers. The midair explosions continued at the same pace they had been going at until they became lesser and lesser in number, and then finally stopped altogether.

Then there was a very loud rumbling that resounded through the air, like the sound of distant thunder, and a stiff wind blew through the forest. Both went as suddenly as they had come.

The silence afterwards was in some ways more deafening than the previous cacophony.

"So, is it safe to gain some altitude now without being shot down by your "lasers"?" Courvoisier asked.

Kitty didn't respond for a few moments, then nodded to Courvoisier. "I've already ordered the *Mgalekgolo* to safe their lasers. We'll be Oscar Mike in a moment though. I'd rather not stay around during an

artillery bombardment."

Courvoisier nodded. "Very well. Schnaufer, Mainard, stay with them and keep an eye out for trouble."

"Yes, ma'am," the albino and the cropped blond said at the same time.

"Bloch, you're with me."

The black-haired girl's eyes widened in disbelief.

"As long as you control yourself and do not shoot everything in sight, you're still a good soldier, Bloch. So follow my orders and we'll be fine, are we clear?"

Bloch saluted. "_Jawohl!_" she said crisply. Then she looked at the body of Valerie KrÃ¼ger, and all energy seemed to fade away from her. "Ma'am, what aboutâ€¦"

Courvoisier noticed the direction of Bloch's gaze, and carefully forced herself to not look at the body crumpled pitifully on the ground. She turned to Kitty. "Will you deliver Val-Major KrÃ¼ger's body to the nearest base for us? She deserves to be buried with honor."

Kitty nodded solemnly. "I've already made an agreement with DeBlanc to take KrÃ¼ger's body out of the forest. An extra kilometer or two won't be a problem."

Courvoisier nodded and smiled. It look a little forced to Kitty, but at least most of it was genuine.

"Then we're off," Courvoisier said before she zoomed upwards into the dark sky, followed closely by Bloch.

Kitty watched them for a few more moments before turning to everyone present. "That's our cue," she said. "Let's move out, before these 'Neuroi' decide to take an interest in us aga-"

"**Amazon One this is Stork, do you copy, over?**" a voice suddenly interrupted Kitty.

"Go ahead, Stork," Kitty responded.

"**We've come to pick you girls up. There's a clearing about 230 meters to your southwest big enough to us to land. We'll meet you girls there.**"

Kitty smiled behind her helmet. Looks like they won't have to walk after all. "Roger, Stork. We'll be there, over. Also, be advised we need to transport a body. Set the troop bay's temperature down to 3 Â°C."

"**Ma'am? A body?" **The pilot sounded worried.

"Too complicated to explain now. Just do it."

"**Yes, ma'am. Wilco, out.**"

* * *

><p>150 meters above the Ardennes Forest

At the same timeâ€|

"This is _Commandant_ Courvoisier to Sedan base, do you copy, over?"

Nothing but static played over her radio.

"I repeat, this is _Commandant_ Courvoisier to Sedan base, does anyone copy, over?"

Again, nothing but the random noise of the universe. Nothing useful.

"Ma'am," Bloch asked.

Courvoisier frowned. _'Something is wrong. First the sniping, then the Neuroi move artillery within range of the Ardennes, and now I can't raise anyone at Sedan base? The Neuroi have to be massing for an assault, but where?'_

"Ma'am, do you hear me?" Bloch repeated.

Courvoisier shook her thought away. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Ma'am, what _is_ that thing?" Bloch asked, pointing at the object in the distance.

Courvoisier looked in the direction Bloch was pointing at and sighed. "Ah, yes. That."

Far in the distance, roughly where the artillery fire had been coming from, a black cloud was rising. The cloud was shaped roughly like a mushroom whose cap hadn't quite opened yet; the stalk tall and rough like it hadn't quite grown right. Though it looked from where Courvoisier and Bloch was hovering, the mere fact that they could see it from this distance meant that the "mushroom cloud" was hundreds of meters tall, if not kilometers. And it was still growing, like a mushroom from Hades.

"Your guess is as good as mine. If that was the result of that 'artillery' Gunnery Sergeant Asada called in, then I would very much like to know where Gallia can get the artillery gun that shot that shell," Courvoisier said wryly.

Bloch nodded numbly. "Thatâ€|I would like to say it's as big as the railway guns we used to use, but not even those could match _that_ in power." She then shook herself. "Anyway, did you manage to raise Sedan base?"

"No, I didn't. And I very much doubt that this communications problem is coincidental either," Courvoisier said grimly. "Tell Schnauffer and Mainard to keep following those soldiers and to protect DeBlanc, and that we're on our way to Sedan base."

Bloch nodded and started communicated the orders to her two wingmates

when her magic radar picked up something. "Ma'am!"

Courvoisier started to respond, but her voice was drowned out by a great roaring sound that filled the air.

A massive shape dived down from high above at great velocities before stopping very suddenly and hovering in front of the two night witches. The shape turned out to be a giant aircraft with a distinctly fat profile and short, stubby wings. Its hovering ability seemed to be achieved via the usage of a massive number of jet engines if the multiple air intakes and thrust plumes were any indication.

The aircraft's front section had a number of small windows on the top part, suggesting it was the cockpit, but the windows appeared to have been somehow made opaque to anyone looking in, so Courvoisier couldn't confirm her theory. The windows also looked to be very thick and set in just-as-thick armor, which practically screamed "Military Aircraft!" to Courvoisier.

Confirming this were three pylons on each stubby wing, each with some kind of weapon attached to it. Going from wingtip to wing root, there was a cluster of four rockets mounted onto a set of rails (which seemed to Courvoisier to be a more economical way to mount rockets than the current racks), a cluster of smaller rockets mounted into a 19-cell pod (which looked like a larger, cylindrical version of a Fliegerfaust to Courvoisier), and a massive rocket dwarfing the others mounted directly onto the pylon (which made Courvoisier wonder just how big a warhead it mounted and how much damage it could do).

But what really drew the attention of the witches was the gun turret mounted below the cockpit on the aircraft's chin. Twin 3-barreled autocannons were mounted in it, and both were pointed directly at Courvoisier and Bloch. Two more smaller 3-barreled guns, mounted on the aircraft's flanks, were also pointed at the witches, but they paled in comparison to the chin turret.

Both witches raised their magic shields and waited for the aircraft to make its move.

It didn't.

"Ma'am," Bloch said warily.

"Don't. Just keep your shields up, but don't fire." Courvoisier then raised her left hand in greeting. "_Bonjour!_ I am _Commandant _Marielle Courvoisier of the _Armée de l'air_ of Gallia! Would you kindly introduce yourselves so that we may avoid any unpleasant incidents?" she shouted over the aircraft's roar.

There was a few moments of silence as the aircraft failed to respond to Courvoisier's greeting. Then abruptly, it turned and flew away. It didn't fly very far though. It had only flown a couple of hundred meters before it stopped, and then lowered itself to the ground with ungainly grace, like delicately landing a rocket-powered bathtub on a bed of roses without disturbing a single one.

"What theâ€¦" Bloch muttered before turning to Courvoisier. "Shouldn't we help? I mean-"

"Ignore it," Courvoisier ordered. "If it had meant us harm, it would've attacked us as soon as it had seen us rather than just hover in front of us like that. Schnaufer and Mainard can handle the situation as is. Right now, we need to go to Sedan base and find out what is happening. Are we clear?"

Bloch nodded. "_Jawohl._"

Courvoisier nodded back. "Let's be off then. To Sedan."

* * *

><p>In a clearing somewhere in Ardennes Forest

At the same timeâ€|

Jennifer, Schnaufer, and Mainard watched with looks of amazement (though Mainard hid it well under a blanket of impassiveness) as the massive aircraft lowered itself to the ground.

"What. Is. That?" Mainard asked in disbelief.

"It looks kind of like a _Gigant_, but a little bigger and with much shorter wings," Schnaufer noted quietly.

"That and the whole hovering like a helicopter thing is sure to catch anyone's attention," Jennfier said, before slapping herself on the forehead. "Oh Zeus, I'm turning into Marian."

A massive rampâ€"easily large enough for four people to walk into side-by-side with room to spareâ€"lowered on the aircraft's rear as it neared the ground, along with two legs with wheels at the ends. In the middle of the ramp, was another armored soldier, but his-

'_Or her?_'_ Jennifer wondered.

-armor was of a slightly different design than the marines, and was also colored black rather than the mottled green of the marines. Not the dark grey Kitty and her team used, but pure black, as black as a moonless night. It likely wasn't night camouflage, since pure black would stand out at night, so it must be for some other purpose Jennifer couldn't figure out at the moment. The soldier was manning a three-barreled machine gun like the one the Hunter named Zurru used. Though the barrels were pointed at the ground at the moment, the soldier looked ready to bring it back up at the first hint of a threat.

'_Jeez, why do these guys and girls all need machine guns with multiple barrels anyway? Isn't one barrel good enough for them?_'_Jennifer thought wryly.

All the good humor vanished from her thoughts though, as the armored soldier stepped aside to allow the two Hunters through. Carried in one arm like a newborn babe, Togumi Sara Taso carried the body of Valerie KrÃ¼ger. The motion looked incredibly gentle to Jennifer, though she remembered what Taso said about humans and wondered if the Hunter really understood the significance of the act.

Jennifer hadn't really known Valerie KrÃ¼ger that well. She'd heard

her talk on Night Witch Radio before, but then again she'd heard a lot of night witches' voices in her time. She'd talked to witches on NWR, only to find out that they'd died just days after she'd heard their voices. She'd even once had been in mid-conversation with a witch when she was blown in half, by a Neuroi death ray in the gut afterwards. She'd never forget the witch's pain-filled scream for the rest of her days.

But this was the first time she'd actually seen one of her comrade's bodies the same day she'd heard her speak. It had been short, a little silly, and it was almost 100% certain that Courvoisier had talked her into it somehow. It had been KrÃ¼ger's apparently best effort at singing "Erika". Terrible didn't even begin to describe her performance, but the hilarity it'd brought to every night witch listening in had raised their spirits.

And now, Jennifer would never again hear Valerie KrÃ¼ger sing terribly, or even hear her sing at all. She'd never hear KrÃ¼ger laugh, cry, get embarrassed, or anything ever again. She could only imagine what Courvoisier must be feeling. She herself couldn't possibly imagine what it'd be like to have your lover die right in front of you. It's just too much.

Suddenly, Jennifer was knocked out of her thoughts by an armored hand clasp her shoulder.

"Hey, you're not planning on walking back, are you? You don't look like you need the exercise, but if you really want to, I'm not stopping you," Kitty quipped.

Jennifer felt the first signs of a giggle start to bubble up from within her, but she suppressed it at the last second. It'd be horribly improper to do such a thing at someone's funeral, after all. Still, the little joke raised her spirits back to somewhere around normal.

Jennifer turned to look up at the helmeted face. It was still blank and unreadable, yet she imagined Kitty was smiling an enigmatic grin behind it. "Well, they say Marines have to live the rough life, but I'd hate to waste this free ride since it's here and all. So no thanks, Kitty. I'll be taking the high road instead," she said jauntily.

Kitty nodded, and Jennifer could imagine her grin getting wider. "Right then, let's get on board. On the double!" Kitty said cheerfully.

"Yes, ma'am!" Jennifer shouted before walking towards the aircraft.

Meanwhile, behind Jennifer, Kitty watched her confident stride and smiled.

"Getting attached to the kid?" Muffin asked.

"Maaaybe," Kitty replied mysteriously, before chuckling. "She actually reminds me a bit of myself when I was a kid."

"You knew how to cast Curaga and wore panties in public when you were a kid?" Snapshot said in a perfect deadpan.

Kitty laughed out loud, which attracted strange looks from the two witches still there. "Nah, I wasn't that amazing back then. I was just your regular kind of amazing."

Princess giggled, while Muffin palmed her face.

"For God's sakes, can you be serious for once?" Muffin asked in an exasperated tone.

"Okay, then. Everyone, get on board the Pelican. You two, get on board as well," Kitty said to the cropped blond and albino night witches.

Mainard, the cropped blond, scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous! We can fly perfectly well with our strikers! Isn't that right, Schnaufer?"

"H-Huh?" Schnaufer, the albino, asked in a startled tone. "Um, yes. We can."

"I'm not doubting your ability to fly. I'm doubting your ability to fly at 2,472 kilometers per hour," Kitty aid flatly.

Both witches blinked and turned to stare at the fat, ungainly-looking aircraft. "Thatâ€¦_thing_ can fly up to Mach 2?" Mainard asked incredulously. "It doesn't look like it could do 300 kph, let alone over 2,400. In fact, it looks like it shouldn't even be able to get off the ground, so how was it able to hover like a helicopter and how can it possibly fly faster than the speed of sound?!"

"**Oy, what'd you say?!**" a male voice boomed out from the aircraft. "**I'll 'ave you know this baby can do Mach 2.2 at sea level! Your piddly little propeller legs things couldn't possibly do more than 600 kph, so why don't you take yer liddle comments and shove it up yer-**"

There was a sound of metal hitting metal, along with a yelp of pain.

"**I apologize for the rantings of my copilot,**" a female voice said calmly. "**He won't be doing that again. Now could everyone please get in the Pelican already?**"

All present, cowed by the bizarreness of the order, nodded and proceeded to follow Jennifer into the aircraft. The night witches first landed on the ground and deployed small wheels from their strikers before jumping out, picking the strikers up and carrying them, and then following the Marines onboard.

Inside, Jennifer stared around in amazement and curiosity at the aircraft the pilot had called a "Pelican". The interior of the Pelican was much smaller than it looked on the outside, but was still pretty large compared to anything she'd ever been in considering the ceiling was about twelve feet above her. Seats lined the walls on both sides. There were 16 normal-sized seats and 2 larger seats big enough to seat a Hunter on each side of the wall, giving the Pelican a total of 32 troops and 4 Hunters, just slightly more than what a C-47 can carry or greater if one were to count the Hunters as light tanks. Each seat was divided by a hollow divider that resembled the

weapon holders for the strikers back at the hangar, suggesting that these dividers might serve the same purpose. Each seat was also connected to a shaft on the floor, suggesting that the seats might be able to rotate, though the why escaped Jennifer's grasp. The two Hunters were already sitting in two of the larger seats, with some kind of harness strapping them in.

Just ahead of each of the two rows of seats was a console fitted with a joystick with an attached seat and screen. Each console was currently manned by an armored soldier who seemed to be dividing their attention between the screen and her. Jennifer couldn't see what was on the screen from this distance, but she assumed they were controls for the 3-barreled machine guns on the hull judging from the consoles' positions.

In the center of the bay between the two consoles laid the body of Valerie KrÃ¼ger, wrapped in a tarp and apparently taped to the floor, likely to keep her from rolling around. Jennifer was secretly glad that she didn't have to look at the corpse throughout the whole flight, and she thought the soldiers likely felt the same way.

The far end of the aircraft held two seats sitting side-by-side, separated by a console with levers and buttons, and currently occupied by two people in armor. One of them turned to look at her, revealing a visor that was very different in design from the other soldiers. Instead of the thin rectangle of the Marines or the wide triangle of Kitty's team, this one was a massive bulge that took up most of the top half of the soldier's face, making him/her look like some kind of giant bug. A hose ran out the lower half and into the aircraft, likely providing oxygen to the pilot like the oxygen masks for fighter pilots and witches working at high altitudes. The pilot's stare lasted only a moment before he/she returned his/her attention to the flight controls.

Jennifer heard the clang of boots on metal behind her and turned around to see Kitty, her team, Schnaufer, and Mainard walking into the aircraft. Kitty and her team immediately began putting their weapons into the hollows of the dividers, confirming Jennifer's theory about them, while the two night witches were looking around the interior as Jennifer was.

Kitty noticed and paused her work. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" she asked Schnaufer and Mainard.

Schnaufer fidgeted before speaking. "Um, where do we put our weapons and, um, strikers?" she asked in a voice so quiet it was barely above a whisper.

Kitty silently resolved to find out when this girl's birthday is and give her a megaphone, or at least some speaking lessons, as a birthday present. But before she could answer, someone did it for her.

"Use the DURANDAL weapon holders. They should be big enough to fit thoseâ€¦ strikers and autocannons. They're next to the big seats, just push the red button after placing your stuff in it," the female pilot answered.

Schnaufer and Mainard said a word of thanks as they headed for the dividers in question. Well technically, Mainard said it out loud.

Schnaufer's was more of a mutter. Getting back to the point, they discovered to their joy that their equipment did in fact fit into the hollow spaces of the dividers, and that the red button somehow made the equipment stick to the holders and that pressing it again made them not stick somehow.

"Electromagnetic holders," the pilot explained after seeing their confusion. "Uses way more power than the Geckopads, but it's easier to get stuff on and off."

Both Mainard and Schnaufer nodded without really understanding, and then turned to Jennifer who shrugged in response. "Don't ask me. They didn't explain anything to me either," she said.

Suddenly, all three witches heard a loud whistle that caught their attention. They turned to see Kitty sitting down next to her already seated teammates.

"Alright, I'll only say this once, so listen up," Kitty ordered, holding up three fingers. "Step One: sit down in any available seat, but leave one of the seats closest to the ramp open so the gunner can sit down. Step Two: grab the restraining harness above you and pull it down until it clicks. Step Three: sit tight and hang on. Any questions? No? Then carry it out, girls!"

As they scrambled to do what Kitty ordered, the ramp gunner went and sat down on the closest seat available as the rear ramp lifted up and shut with a thump. Jennifer was the first to finish, followed closely by Mainard and Schnaufer. The latter just barely managed to get the harness down on her as everyone felt the Pelican lifting off.

It was at that moment that Kitty's TACPAD began buzzing on her left arm. A quick look at the caller ID said it was Lieutenant Colonel Johnson who was trying to contact her. She obliged.

"Kitty here. What's going on, sir?"

"**You're not going back up to orbit. You're to change course and head for Sedan to pick up Fireteam Vanguard, pronto!**" Johnson's voice boomed out.

Kitty could feel the Pelican bank sharply as every seat rotated until they were facing forward. She worked her mouth as she thought. "Sir, I thought Big Bird's Pelican had been sent to pick them up. Why us?"

"**Let's just say that you're also going to be picking up Big Bird's crew in addition to Vanguard. Things have gone completely FUBAR here. Gotta go now. Things are gonna get busy here too in a bi-**"

The sound of gunfire and explosions then drowned out whatever Johnson was going to say and the call disconnected.

Kitty could only say one thing in response before the Pelican accelerated. "Fuck."

* * *

><p>Addendum:<p>

[1]: TACTOP: short for TACTical LapTOP: a series of military laptops developed and manufactured by SiriusHub. They were known for their thick, watertight casings made out of 5 centimeters of Titanium-A on all sides. This made them very heavy, but extremely durable. They've been used successfully as emergency close quarters combat weaponry, and even as gun shields, due to their size, weight, and material composition.

[2]: Astounding Science Fiction: a Liberian science fiction magazine series currently published by Street & Smith. It was originally known as Astounding Stories when it was initially published in 1930, but had undergone several name changes until it finally changed to its current name in 1938. The magazine is known for focusing on the science and technology aspect of science fiction, making it popular among hard sci-fi enthusiasts.

[3]: Tawantinsuyu: a nation that occupied most of northwestern South Liberion and much of its western coast. The capital was Qusqu. The official language was Quechua, but Aymara, Puquina, Jaqi family, Muchik and scores of smaller languages were also spoken in Tawantinsuyu. Tawantinsuyu was currently a constitutional monarchy, with power divided between the Sapa Inca (the emperor), the Inkap rantin (the prime minister), and the "Council of the Realm": originally composed of nobles from every province and now composed of elected officials divided between the "Voice of the Nobles" and the "Voice of the Commons". Their military was known for having some of the best mountain troops in the world, rivaled only by the Nepalese.

[4]: MinengeschoŸ: a type of high-capacity autocannon shell manufactured by Karlsland and first used in 1940 against Neuroi attacking Britannia from across the Channel. The shell was drawn from high-quality steel instead of having the explosives cavity drilled into it like normal, allowing for much thinner walls and a greater amount of explosive filler to be placed into it. Both a 2 cm and a 3 cm version were developed for Karsland fighters and witches.

[5]: Carbon nanoweave: a type of cloth made by weaving unbroken lengths of carbon nanotubes together. Due to the fineness of the nanotubes, it can only be accomplished by specialized fabricators inspired by the spinnerets of spiders. Nanoweave was highly durable and airtight, making it a prime material to use in ENHAZ (ENvironmental HAZard) suits and other clothing requiring being sealed against the outside environment. It had been described as feeling like carbon fiber, but smoother in texture.

[6]: ArmŒe de l'air: Gallian for "Army of the air". It was the name for Gallia's Air Force starting from 1934. Before then, it had been known since 1909 as the Service AŒronautique.

End
file.